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VOL. VIII. \$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 William Street, New York.

Price,
Five Cents. No. 95.



ALL THIS MIRIAM SHAW SAW—NOT A LOOK, NOT A GESTURE, ESCAPED HER.

WHAT SHE COST HIM; Or, CROOKED PATHS.

BY ARABELLA SOUTHWORTH.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD LOVE AND THE NEW.
A GLORIOUS August afternoon was drawing

to a close: the sun had disappeared behind the distant hills; but its last rays lingered yet on the tops of the stately trees, and gilded the gray, weather-beaten turrets of Garnett Holm.

That evening the magnificent old place was endowed with new life; sounds of music, gay laughter and merry voices were heard in all directions. Numbers of young people wandered in and out among the trees and shrubs, or sat in groups upon the green, velvety sward.

At some little distance from the house were erected several large tents, and servants might be seen hurrying backward and forward, bringing trays heavily laden with refreshments.

It certainly was a gay, festive scene, and very proud and happy old Edward Garnett looked, as he moved slowly about among his assembled guests leaning on the arm of his nephew and heir, in honor of whose return home, after an absence of over three years, the *fete* was being given.

Ralph Garnett was an heir of whose appearance any aristocratic family might well feel proud. Tall, erect, and well made, his figure alone would have marked him out from the generality of men; but he had, besides, a pleasant manly face; though in it a critical observer might have discovered certain lines about the mouth indicative of a disposition not indeed without generosity and amiability, but weak, vacillating, and unstable, wanting in steadiness of purpose, and likely to be easily influenced by others.

Woe to the woman whose misfortune it might be to give a trusting, loving heart to his keeping, to place the happiness of her life in his hands. Better, far better for her that she were sleeping under the waters of that deep and treacherous river which was rolling steadily on through the darkening gloom.

Ralph Garnett was a man that might be carried away by a tide of passion, mad and impetuous, though on the object of that passion he was capable of lavishing an intense, unreasoning love. But a love, true and loyal, capable of living through cares of joy and sorrow—a love which time would not change or adversity dim—his shallow nature could never know or understand.

Thoughts such as these were passing through the mind of Miriam Shaw as she stood watching him from behind a clump of evergreens which completely hid her from his view; and while she watched, her brow grew darker, a look of jealousy came into her coal-black eyes, her thin lips became pressed tightly together, and her usually pale cheeks grew hot with a hectic flush.

The evening twilight had gradually given place to the clear, silver light of the full harvest moon. Every object was as distinctly visible as though it had been noonday.

Ralph had by this time left the side of his uncle; his companion now was a bright, fair-haired girl, who, in her simple white dress, looked little more than a child. He gathered a bunch of white moss roses, and fastened them among the rich coils of her golden hair; after which he laid both his hands on her shoulders, and surveyed his work with a look of unmistakable pleasure. She raised her

laughing blue eyes to his face, but when they met his admiring gaze she hung her head, and a vivid blush suffused her cheeks. He bent over her until his lips almost touched her hair, and said something in a low voice. The crimson flush on her cheek grew deeper still, and he drew her hand through his arm and led her away.

All this Miriam Shaw saw—not a look, not a gesture, escaped her—and as they moved slowly on, she, keeping well under the shadow of the trees, followed them.

Though far below him in social position, Ralph Garnett had once loved Miriam, and it was on a night clear and beautiful as this that she had last seen him, as he stood before her in that very same spot, the moonbeams shining on his bright hair and handsome, eager face. Only too well she remembered how he had broken off some blossoms from that very bush, and twined them in her hair; how he had clasped her in his arms, breathing words of passionate love and admiration into her ears, vowing that come what might, he would be true to her, and though forced to leave her now, he would return to claim her as his bride when three years had passed.

The three years had gone by, and thus she saw him as above described. After all, it is nothing but the oft-told tale of a woman's misplaced trust and man's heartless fickleness.

Still, it was not love alone which gave birth to the jealous passion which was rankling in Miriam's heart. She might have yielded to the stern decree of fate, and ceased to think any more of Ralph as her lover; yet to give up her claim on the man who had vowed to share his position and wealth with her, her ambition would not suffer her to do so without a desperate struggle.

"I will conquer yet!" she muttered through her clinched teeth. "I made him my slave once. What is there to hinder me from doing the same again? This place shall be mine yet, and those who disregarded and despised poor Miriam Shaw will be only too ready to pay court to Mrs. Garnett. He is flirting with this young girl now. But just wait a while, Miss Lillie! Your triumph will be short-lived, I can tell you! I am not going to step aside to make way for you—a rosy-cheeked, flaxen-haired doll! He shall come back to me willingly; or, if not, mother and I will know how to make him! Ha, ha!"

And a wild, discordant laugh rung suddenly out, and died away, like the cry of some ill-omened bird, among the surrounding trees.

"What was that?" exclaimed Lillie Garnett, clinging closer to her companion's arm, and trembling from head to foot with fear.

They had reached that part of the shrubbery which was most thickly planted, and it was

only here and there that a stray moonbeam succeeded in penetrating the heavy foliage.

"What was it, Ralph?" Lillie asked again. "It was such a strange sound; it was dreadful!"

"Yes, it was strange," he assented, "but there is no need to be afraid."

"But I *am* afraid, and cannot help it, Ralph! There! did you see that? Oh, why did you bring me to this horrid dark place?" cried Lillie, as a bat flew across their path, almost striking its wings against her face.

"Oh, Lillie, so timid, when I am with you to take care of you!" he said, tenderly and reproachfully. "Do you think I would let any harm befall you?"

"I suppose not; but I want to go back," Lillie answered.

So they turned, and began to retrace their steps in silence, which she presently broke by exclaiming, "Listen! Do you not hear the band? Oh, please, do let us make haste; the dancing is going to begin!"

"Very well; and as I am to open the ball with my fair cousin, it would never do for us to be the last to arrive."

"No; Frances would not like to be kept waiting."

"What do you mean by speaking of Frances?"

"You will dance first with her, of course?"

"I will dance first with Lillie."

"Papa would not like you to do that, Ralph."

"Why not?"

"You know why yourself," Lillie answered, in a low voice.

"You mean that your father has always intended Frances and me for each other," Ralph said, quickly. "Your sister is a charming girl; no one can deny that. Still, she is not my style, and I fancy I am right in supposing that I am not hers. We never could care for each other as he wishes. Look! we can see the dancers now. They are only waiting for us to begin. This waltz is mine, is it not?"

"Very well."

They had just reached the end of the narrow path, where it led out on the lawn, when Ralph suddenly stood still.

"Did you hear anything just now?" he asked.

"Those branches rustled, I think. But what is the matter? You look as if you had seen a ghost! You thought me very silly for being frightened a few minutes ago, and you are just as bad yourself now."

Ralph laughed, but awkwardly and uneasily, for he had seen what his cousin had failed to notice—namely, a pair of glittering black eyes watching him from among the trees—and he felt fully convinced that those eyes belonged to none other than his discarded love, Miriam Shaw.

The spacious ball-room of Garnett Holm opened out on the lawn. The band was stationed near the open window. Some of the guests remained within, but by far the greater number preferred the novel enjoyment of dancing in the open air, in the light of the glorious harvest moon.

Nothing which could add to their entertainment was wanting. Every one pronounced Ralph to be a charming host. He danced with the wives and daughters alike and had a pleasant, friendly word to every one. No one suspected what an effort he had to make in order to appear gay and light-hearted; no one, except perhaps Miriam Shaw, who, apart from all the rest, noted how studiously he avoided letting his eyes wander in her direction.

Her presence troubled him strangely. Something of pity, something of remorse and shame, something too of the love which he had long since deemed dead and gone, kept stirring in his breast. In vain he endeavored to forget her presence. Whatever way he looked, her face haunted him. He felt instinctively that her eyes were fastened on him, drawing him toward her with a power which by degrees became irresistible.

"I must try to find an opportunity of speaking to her for a few minutes," he said to himself. "After the relation in which we once stood the one to the other, we cannot possibly pass each other as strangers, and I have not even seemed to recognize her this evening."

He turned his head, and looked her full in the face. She met his gaze calmly enough, but almost immediately she left the place where she had been standing, and walked slowly down the path along which he had come with Lillie a short time before. Quick as thought he followed her, and scarcely had gone a hundred yards when he was at her side.

"Miriam," he said, but she did not answer.

"Miriam, have you quite forgotten me? Will you not speak to me?"

She stood still, and faced round.

"What do you want with me?" she asked.

Ralph hesitated, and then said, uneasily, "I thought I should like just to shake hands with you, Miriam. You are about the only person in the place who has not given me a 'welcome home!'"

"And whose fault is that?" she asked, taking no notice of his extended hand.

"Yours, I suppose."

"It is not. Ask your own conscience if you have taken the slightest pains to speak to me. When you and I said good-by, I never expected such treatment at your hands. You have been home a whole week, and if you had wanted a welcome from me, why did you not come and ask for it sooner? Was your time so entirely

taken up with Miss Lillie, that you had not even five minutes to spare for me?"

"My time has been very much occupied," he said, beginning to wish with all his heart that he had continued to keep out of Miriam's way.

"Oh, yes, of course it has! And has your wooing been successful yet, Mr. Garnett? Is there any chance of soon being invited to dance at your wedding?"

Ralph looked very uncomfortable, and made no rejoinder.

"Is it true what people say?" Miriam questioned, coming a step or two nearer to him, and searching his face with her eyes—"that you are engaged to Lillie Garnett? Is it true, Ralph?"

"It is not," he answered.

But as he spoke, he turned his head impatiently away.

"Then why do you give people such good cause to say it? Do you know that every one was talking about you this evening?"

"I am not answerable to you for my conduct," Ralph returned, angrily and haughtily.

"You *are* answerable to me. And mark my words, Ralph Garnett, you had better take care what you are about! A promise is a promise, even if it be three years old."

Ralph winced and changed color.

"I thought you were too sensible a girl to set any store by a piece of childish folly," he said. "I am very sorry to find you have been thinking so seriously of what happened so long ago, for you cannot but see how silly it was. Shake hands now, my girl, and let us be friends."

"Friends you and I can never be; you must know that yourself!" cried Miriam, passionately.

"Oh, yes, we can. And if you expect any atonement from me, I will make it willingly; indeed I will, Miriam. You shall have no reason to say that I acted badly by you. Miriam, wait!—listen to me, please!"

But Miriam appeared to have no wish to listen, for she had disappeared among the trees.

He went back to the dancers, but of Miriam that night he saw nothing more. She must have returned home, and he felt heartily glad of it. Still, the remembrance of what had passed could not be shaken off. All the rest of the evening his looks appeared so abstracted and pre-occupied that Lillie more than once could not account to herself for the curious unconnected rejoinders he made to remarks addressed him by herself and others.

CHAPTER II.

DISTRUST.

ABOUT sixteen years before this story opens,

two strangers—a mother and her daughter—had taken up their abode in a tiny ivy-covered cottage, just half-way between the village of Cornwall and the entrance-gate to one of the back avenues of the Garnett mansion. The mother was a pale, worn-looking woman, evidently one to whom life had brought a large share of trouble and anxiety. The daughter was a black-haired, black-eyed, intelligent child, some six or seven years old, with a passionate, fiery temper; proud, strong-willed, and possessing sufficient resolution to refuse the many bribes offered her in the hope of inducing her to talk about their former life.

Over Mrs. Shaw and her daughter hung an impenetrable cloud of mystery. Who and what they were, whence they had come, and what their object was in coming to Cornwall no one could discover. They made very few friends, for the neighbors inclined to look rather coldly on them; and Miriam spent her youth in calm, uneventful monotony, until Ralph Garnett came home from college to celebrate his coming of age.

The youth remained for some time, having no companion except his uncle; for his cousins Frances and Lillie were both at school, and there were few people of his own position living in the neighborhood.

At first, the time hung rather heavily on the young man's hands; but very soon he fell a victim to Miriam Shaw's dark, splendid beauty. Scarcely a day passed that they did not meet, until his uncle, furious at the discovery of what was going on, insisted on his returning to college for a couple of years, which he did. At the expiration of two years, Ralph was sent to travel abroad, his uncle being fully convinced that his boyish infatuation could not possibly survive a separation of three years from its object.

Mr. Garnett's plan appeared to have succeeded admirably, and Ralph had learned to feel thankful that he had been saved from taking the rash and irrevocable step which he had once contemplated.

But for all that, the few words which he had exchanged with Miriam Shaw that evening excited a tumult in his breast. It almost seemed to him that the power by which she had once enthralled reason, sense and judgment had not been conquered, but only laid to sleep for a while, and that the spell which she had once cast over him was as strong and as indissoluble as ever.

"Will you come with me to my study, Ralph?" his uncle said to him next morning after breakfast; "I want to have a few minutes' conversation with you."

"Very well, uncle," he answered; but his mental ejaculation was: "Could he not let me alone just for to-day? If he begins to talk to

me about my future, as he is almost sure to do, what am I to say to him? If I only had had the good fortune not to have met that girl last night it would have all been plain sailing for me."

"Sit down, my dear boy," Mr. Garnett said, kindly, as he turned the key in the lock of the study door. "You have been home over a week now, and we have not said one word about business. Up to this there seems to have been time for nothing but pleasure."

"I am ready to listen to whatever you have to say to me, dear uncle," Ralph returned, consigning himself to his fate, and placing himself opposite to the stately, white-haired old man who had always acted toward him as a father.

"Do you remember our last conversation in this room the evening before you went away three years ago?" Mr. Garnett asked.

Well, indeed, did Ralph remember it, for on that occasion his uncle had spoken almost the only harsh words he ever remembered him to have addressed to him. After having censured him very sternly and seriously about his foolish flirtation with Miriam Shaw, he reminded him that his own mother was not a lady, and that his father had degraded himself and brought dishonor on the Garnett family by marrying her.

"You are the son of my only brother," he concluded. "If you had been my own child I could not have loved you more than I do; but if any low tastes and feelings, which you may have had the misfortune to inherit from your mother, show themselves in you, we must be strangers forever after, and so long as I live you shall not set foot inside Garnett Holm. If you wish to remain friends with me, give me your word of honor as a gentleman that you will have nothing more to do with that girl, and that you will make no attempt to see her again before you go."

The required promise was then given, but scarcely an hour afterward he had stolen out to meet Miriam at their usual trysting-place.

Ralph never thought of the vows of unchanging love which he had sworn to her that night, and did not answer.

"Well, Ralph, have you forgotten the agreement we made with each other?" asked his uncle.

"No, uncle, I have not."

"And have you kept it?"

"I have."

The untruth was spoken nervously, and with some hesitation; but Edward Garnett never thought of doubting the correctness of his statement, and the expression of eager anxiety left his face.

"That's right, my boy!" he said, cordially; "and I dare say the girl will marry well in

her own position some of these days. But enough about her. There is something else I want to say to you. You know, Ralph, that the property I intend to be yours at my death; and it is but just that Frances and Lillie should have their mother's entire private fortune."

"I know that," Ralph interrupted; "and I sincerely hope that no consideration for me will induce you not to give them what by right belongs to them. Settle as much as you possibly can on them."

"Nobly spoken, Ralph! And now, do not misunderstand me. I have no wish to control or influence your actions in any way. You will marry some day—soon, I hope; and I am sure make a wise choice. Your wife shall have a daughter's place in my heart. I can promise you that. But should you learn to love one of my girls, the dearest wish of my heart would be fulfilled. I did hope once that you and Frances might have cared for each other; but my little Lillie seems to be your favorite. Stop! I don't want you to say anything about her just yet. I would much rather you took plenty of time to make up your mind, and, after all, you know very little of each other. But one thing I ask—do not trifle with her, Ralph; she is so young and innocent: she knows nothing whatever of the ways of the world. It would be a cruel thing to make a toy of her heart."

Edward Garnett stretched out his hand, and Ralph placed his in it. There were tears in the old man's eyes, which he hastily dashed away, and standing up, he said, in a cheerful voice, "There! that will do for to-day. Will you come out onto the grounds with me? There are some trees, they tell me, ought to be cut down. I want to consult you about them."

Meanwhile, Frances and Lillie were in their pretty sitting-room, discussing the events of the previous evening.

"I cannot understand what can have happened to Ralph," Lillie was saying, fretfully. "He was so nice and pleasant for the first few hours, then he suddenly seemed to change, and hardly spoke another word to me, and did not take the least notice of anything I said to him. I wonder if I could have said or done anything to vex him? What do you think, Frances?"

Frances was the elder of the two by nearly three years. Taller, graver, and far more womanly-looking than her sister, her face was a very fair and sweet one, though she lacked the bright, sparkling vivacity which was Lillie's principal charm.

Almost as though she had been her mother, Lillie had been in the habit of coming to her in all her troubles for comfort and advice; but she hardly seemed to know what to say to her now, as her eyes rested sadly on the girl's anxious lips.

"I am afraid I cannot help you," she said. "Are you perfectly sure you can recollect nothing you said or did which could annoy him?"

"No, Frances; I am quite sure there was nothing."

"I think I can tell you what was the matter with him, if I like."

Both girls started, and looked round.

The voice came from the other end of the room, and they had fancied themselves quite alone.

In the open doorway stood a little old lady, dressed in rather an antiquated style, with a shrewd, weazen face, and keen, inquisitive eyes.

Miss Anna Gilbert was a distant connection of the Garnetts, and out of kindness, sometimes invited to spend a few weeks at Garnett Holm, where her meddling disposition and insatiable curiosity generally rendered her anything but an agreeable guest.

"Oh, Miss Gilbert, are you there? I never heard you coming in," Lillie exclaimed.

"Oh, I dare say not; the subject of Master Ralph's manner to you was such an all-engrossing one." And there was a peculiar twinkle in her eyes and a malicious smile on her lips as she spoke.

"Really, some people have a knack of saying the most unpleasant things!" was Lillie's angry retort. "I wish very much—"

"Hush, Lillie!" whispered Frances. "What is the use of showing that you are annoyed?"

Lillie took her advice, and was silent, while Frances, turning to the intruder, added coldly, but politely:

"Will you not sit down, Miss Gilbert? Here is a nice comfortable arm-chair."

The old lady sat down, and giving a short, dry cough, with which she was in the habit of prefacing her remarks, said:

"So you two have been laying your heads together about Master Ralph. Will you give me your opinion of him, and then you shall have mine."

"I have no wish to hear your opinion!" Lillie answered, rather hotly. "We all know that you dislike him, and that you mostly have something unkind to say of him."

"Take care of yourself, Lillie; you do not know him as I do. You were not at home when he was here last, three years ago."

Lillie, feeling that her wisest and most dignified course would be to let this remark pass unnoted, asked, in as indifferent a tone as she could assume:

"And what did he do then, may I inquire?"

"He showed himself a great admirer of brunette beauty, that is all."

"What do you mean?"

"Only that there were very tender love

passages between him and a certain girl from the village, Miriam Shaw by name."

"I can scarcely credit it, Miss Gilbert."

"Just as you like, my dear; but I am not in the habit of telling stories."

"Please let us talk about something else," Frances said, decidedly. "Can you not let bygones be bygones?"

"But I rather fancy they are *not* bygones. A smoldering fire is soon rekindled, and—"

"That will do!" exclaimed Frances. "We do not care to hear such things said of Ralph!"

"Oh, I am saying nothing at all; but if I chose to make mischief, I could tell how a certain young gentleman followed a certain young lady down one of the darkest paths of the shrubbery last night, and what a change the conversation he had with her seemed to make in his manner. But I see a great many things that I never speak about. We will let bygones be bygones, as Frances said just now, and say nothing more. Neither of you young ladies seem to be in the best of tempers this morning, so good-by for the present. I hope the atmosphere will be clearer by luncheon time."

And so saying, she arose and left the room.

The two girls looked at each other for a few minutes in silence; then Lillie, throwing herself on her knees beside her sister, and burying her face in her lap, burst out into a passionate fit of weeping.

"Horrid, nasty, mean old thing!" she sobbed. "And yet, if what she says is true, Frances, tell me what I ought to do."

"I don't see what you can well do, dear," Frances answered, slowly. "Try not to think of what Miss Gilbert said."

"But I must find out all about that girl—I must know if he cares for her!"

"Would it trouble you very much if he did?"

"It would kill me, I think! Oh, Frances, I never knew how I cared for him until now. You may think me foolish if you like—I dare say you will laugh at me—but I liked him the very first moment he came here, and I thought he liked me, too. If he didn't, he had no right to say such things to me as he did last night."

There was a troubled, almost frightened look on Frances's face as she gently smoothed back Lillie's golden hair.

"I wish Ralph had stayed away—I wish it with all my heart!" she said. "Oh, I am so sorry about what you told me! I am afraid he is not worthy of you, Lillie."

"Frances, this from you!" cried Lillie, springing to her feet. "I believe that you and Miss Gilbert are in a plot against me. You are jealous of me; I see it all now. Papa always meant that Ralph should marry you, and you are disappointed because he likes me better!"

"Lillie, Lillie, stop! You don't know what you are saying."

Lillie, however, paid no heed; and, turning angrily away, she went out of the room, banging the door after her.

Frances looked sadly after her impetuous, petulant sister, and the tears gathered thickly in her eyes.

"Jealous of her, on account of him!" she said to herself. "Little she knows! Oh, if I could only save her! But I am afraid it is too late now!"

Jealous, Frances certainly was not; for, though she had seen very little of Ralph since he was a mere school boy, the many faults in his character had not escaped her observation, as they had done that of her father and Lillie. True, there had been a time when she used, now and then, to think of him as a possible lover or husband, for her father had made no secret of his wishes on that point; moreover, it was before she had discovered that in another man, totally unlike Ralph Garnett, she had met her fate.

The sisters did not meet again until luncheon time. All traces of Lillie's fit of passion had vanished like a summer-cloud. She and Ralph had arranged to go for a long ride that afternoon, and they invited Frances to accompany them; but she refused, and her non-acceptance of the invitation did not appear to trouble them much.

"They would much rather go alone," Frances thought; and she was right.

CHAPTER III.

PLEDGED TO MARRY.

"WELL, Miriam, are you not going to tell me anything about yesterday?" Mrs. Shaw said to her daughter, as they sat together at breakfast on the morning after the *fete*.

"There is not a great deal to tell," answered Miriam. "The people walked about and sat down just as they liked, and talked and laughed, whether they had anything to talk and laugh about or not. They had more to eat and drink than was good for them. Then they danced till they were too tired to dance any more, and fancied that they were enjoying themselves immensely."

"And what about the Holm party?"

"Oh, they were all there; and that odious Miss Gilbert, too. Mr. Garnett began a speech about the happy occasion, and forgot what he wanted to say before he had well commenced; but the people cheered all the same, and he looked quite delighted with himself and with them."

"And Mr. Ralph Garnett?"

"Oh, he danced a few duty dances with people like the Dawsons and Brownes, and devoted the rest of his time to Miss Lillie."

"Did he dance with you?"

"Oh, dear me, no. I don't suppose he even remembered having seen me before."

Mrs. Shaw drew a very long breath, and a look rather relieved than otherwise came over her face.

"'Tis best so," she said. "Try not to think of him any more, Miriam, and let bygones be bygones."

Miriam's brow grew dark.

"Do you think I will let him throw me over like that?" she exclaimed. "I am not such a fool as to wait quietly all these years for nothing."

"And you are determined still?"

"Of course I am. If he does not come back to me willingly, I will make him. What is the use of our knowing what we do if one cannot get any good by it?"

"Good, do you say?" exclaimed Mrs. Shaw.

"I don't call it good to force a man to marry you. If you do it, he will hate you and make you miserable. If you would only listen to reason, Miriam, we could turn our secret into money. He would pay us any sum for keeping silence, when he knows what it is. Then we could go and live somewhere else, and you could be a fine lady, and have a lady's fortune; and some man, just as fine a gentleman as Ralph Garnett would marry you for love, and not because he had to do so."

Miriam laughed a little.

"You are growing romantic, mother," she said. "I thought you were equally anxious that Ralph—"

"Yes; as long as he cared for you," interrupted her mother. "But I expected all along that it would end so."

"It shall end in his marrying me!" Miriam said, decidedly.

Mrs. Shaw sighed heavily, for she knew by experience that any opposition to her daughter's will would avail her little.

During the morning Miriam busied herself about her household duties. Then she seated herself by the window with her delicate lace-work, the sale of which formed one of their principal means of support.

She heard the sound of horses' hoofs coming quickly up the road. Ralph and Lillie Garnett rode past the cottage. She did not raise her head or pause in her work, but she knew that he looked in and saw her.

"Your walks and rides with your lover won't last much longer, Miss Lillie," she said to herself, as her heart swelled with jealous rage. "If he does not come to see me to-day, I will find some means of speaking to him to-morrow, and then—"

But the hours went by, and Ralph did not come; and when Miriam went to her room that night, there were hot tears in her eyes,

brought there by the memory of another day passed in useless, weary waiting.

She threw open the window and looked out. The clock of the village church was striking half past ten. The clear, metallic tone died away, and no other sound broke the stillness of the night. The walls of the little room seemed to contract around her. The air grew thick and heavy. A hand seemed placed on her chest, and her breath came fast and uneven.

"I cannot stay here!" she exclaimed, half aloud. "I feel as if I were smothering."

She threw a shawl round her, crept down the passage, drew the bolt of the house door, and went noiselessly out. She walked quickly down the road until she came to the Garnett gates, then she paused.

"I will go in here," she thought. "There will be less chance of my meeting any one than on the road."

Very lovely, indeed, Lillie Garnett looked as she rode along at Ralph's side that afternoon. She was perfect mistress of her horse, and the exercise and excitement had given a brighter flush to her cheeks and an additional sparkle to her eyes.

"If we are going to the old church our best way would be round by the back of the grounds," she said, as they came down the avenue.

Ralph hesitated. He did not want to pass by the Shaws' cottage.

"Why not go round the other way," he said. "It is not much longer, and the road is better."

"I do not like riding through the village, Ralph," she objected.

And what could he do but yield?

"Shall I see her?" he wondered.

And his heart began to beat faster.

He did see her, seated at her old post near the window, her dark, proud face bent low over her work. How often had he seen her here long ago, and never before had she failed to look up and smile as he passed. But this time she did not even raise her head or take the slightest notice of him.

"I am glad she did not see us," he thought,—"very, very glad!"

But somehow he missed her old, bright, welcoming smile more than he would have cared to acknowledge.

"Thing scannot go on any longer like this," he said to himself. "That girl can never be anything to me. She ought to understand herself that it would be simply ruin to marry her. Marry her!—head-over-ears in debt as I am! Break with my uncle, and give up Lillie—the dearest, sweetest girl that ever lived! Why, I would be mad to think of doing such a thing! I

will propose for Lillie to-day, and not speak to Miriam again if I can help it. And if I do meet her, I will be an engaged man. She will understand, then, that I have no notion of keeping up this folly. Poor Miriam! It is hard on her, I suppose; but what can I do? I wish—"

"Is anything the matter, Ralph?" Lillie asked. "You have not spoken a word for the last mile. You certainly are not a very agreeable companion to-day."

"I will tell you what I was thinking about when we get to the ruins," he answered.

The church was a picturesque, romantic-looking old building, for the greater part crumbling into ruins, and the broken walls covered with masses of dark-green ivy. Leaving their horses at a neighboring farm-house, Ralph and Lillie went in through the cool, shady ruins; and there, a tale of love was told, which sounded mournfully sweet to the young girl, who listened to it with a half frightened yet rapturous joy, feeling that she could ask for no greater happiness than to sit thus, her head resting on his shoulder, his arm around her waist, and his voice breathing soft, tender words into her ear.

She remembered what Miss Gilbert had said about Ralph and Miriam Shaw that morning. She told him about it, and how miserable she had been; but there was neither fear nor distrust in her heart now, he pleasantly saw; and a few words, not very truthful perhaps, but implicitly believed by her, served to set her mind entirely at rest.

His conscience smote him as he spoke, for he knew that he was deceiving her; but he resolutely tried to stifle its reproving voice by saying to himself, "I do mean well by her—I really do! I mean to love her, and make her happy. She is easily contented, poor child!"

And Lillie Garnett was perfectly contented with her lover; nor could her father find any fault with the way in which he told him his story that evening as they sat alone after dinner.

"It would be useless for me to try to tell you how pleased I am," the old man said. "You know perfectly well what my wishes always were. I would rather give one of my children to you than to any other man in the whole world."

"Uncle," Ralph said, suddenly changing the subject, "will you tell me something about my mother? I know so very little of her history."

Mr. Garnett looked very grave.

"It is rather a painful subject," he answered. "I think it would be better not to talk about it—this evening, at least. Some other time I will answer any questions you may wish to ask."

"That is the way you have always put me

off when I have asked you about her, uncle. I never could get you to give me any information; and I really wish to know everything. Not that it would give me much pleasure, I dare say," he added, gloomily. "Still, I do not care to be kept in the dark any longer."

"Just as you please, my boy," his uncle answered; "but I have not a great deal to tell you. Your father was more than ten years younger than I was; but I hardly think two brothers could have loved each other more than we did. One autumn he joined a shooting party in the mountains, and while there his gun went off accidentally, and gave him a rather severe wound. He was taken to the hotel and had to remain there several weeks. Then he wrote me word that he was a great deal better, but that he would remain with friends for the present; and he did not come home again until the end of the following summer."

"I shall never forget the evening that he arrived, Ralph. Your grandfather and I were sitting in this very room when he walked in, looking more like a corpse than a living man. We were terribly shocked, and had the best advice possible; but he was dying, and nothing could be done for him. With all our care, he only lived a couple of months."

Edward Garnett paused, to clear the huskiness out of his voice. Even after the lapse of so many years he found it very hard to speak without emotion of his only brother. He had never forgiven himself for not having gone to him at once on hearing of his accident, knowing how different matters would have been had he but done so.

"Well, uncle?" asked Ralph, impatient to hear the sequel, and Mr. Garnett, rousing himself, continued:—

"A few days before he died, he called his father and me into his room, and told us that he had married the daughter of the hotel-keeper at whose house he had been. She was a lovely girl, he said; he had been gradually led into making the match, and he bitterly repented of his folly."

"He spoke very little of his married life, but we could easily see how utterly miserable it had been. His health, which had never been good since his wound, broke down."

"His wife must have led him a terrible life, for he was unable to endure her temper any longer, and came home to die in peace. She had been induced not to follow him by constantly receiving large sums of money, the only thing she seemed to have cared for. He begged us to make some arrangement with her when he was dead, and should his child live, to take care of it for his sake."

"The day after his funeral I went up into the Adirondacks, but arrived only in time to hear

that your mother had just died, leaving a boy of a few weeks old. I brought you back with me, and I did my best to keep the promise I made to your dying father. It was not unkindness which made me keep you constantly at school and not let you be much here until you were grown up. I did not want you to learn to care for my girls as sisters; and I think I was right, was I not, Ralph?"

"You were, uncle. You have been more than a father to me," he cried, impulsively. "I only wish I had it in my power to repay you."

"And so you can, by making my child happy. But I am sure you will do that. And now you ought to go to her, Ralph; she will be expecting you."

Ralph had no excuse for remaining away from the ladies any longer; but he did not feel like a very ardent lover as he went in search of Lillie.

The evening seemed very long to him, and he drew a deep sigh of relief when he found himself alone in his room. The die was cast. There could be no wavering or uncertainty now, and he had placed an impassable barrier between him and Miriam.

But his mind was far from being at rest. To sleep would, he knew, be perfectly impossible, and though it was past eleven o'clock, he went down the back stairs and let himself out into the grounds.

As he walked slowly and moodily along, Miriam's face seemed to rise before him, now flashing with angry scorn, now melting into infinite softness and tenderness. He was near the spot which, in bygone times, had been their usual trysting-place, and a few more steps would bring him to it.

Was it imagination or was it reality? Leaning against the stem of an old oak tree, her hands hanging down listlessly on her dark, plain dress, he thought he saw standing the girl whom he had so often found waiting and watching for him there.

He stood gazing at her, his pulses throbbing, his heart beating as he never remembered to have felt it beat before. Twice he tried to speak; twice he failed. Then there was a low, startled cry, and Miriam was clasped in his arms.

And it did not seem in the least strange meeting her thus. He felt as though he had quite expected it. The last three years were as though they never had been. The spring-time of their love had returned, and everything was forgotten in the passionate joy of their reunion.

Miriam was the first to recover herself, and struggling to free herself from his embrace, she said, "I think we must both be mad. Let me go at once, Mr. Garnett."

"Mr. Garnett!" he re-echoed. "What do you mean by using that formal name? Oh, Miriam, 'tis no use your trying to deceive me any longer. You love me still, I know you do!"

"Heaven help me, I do!" she moaned.

"And is that my misfortune? We have each other now. What more can we want?" he cried, for a veritable tide of passion was coursing through his veins, and he hardly knew what he was saying.

"Don't speak like that!" she retorted, angrily. "You made a fool of me once with your vain, false word. You shall not do it again."

"I never thought to make a fool of you, Miriam; I never, never did!"

"Are you in earnest, Ralph?"

"Can you doubt me?"

"Your cousin, Miss Lillie—what of her?"

He dropped her hand as if it had been a scorpion. Those few words had dispelled the illusion, and he remembered to what he had pledged himself that very day.

She was watching him closely, and saw what an impression her words had made.

"You must make your choice between us, Mr. Garnett," she said. "You know that you dare not make love to your uncle's daughter if you do not mean to marry her. After all I suppose it would be the wisest thing for you to do, and all the world would say that you could not find a more suitable wife."

"Stop, Miriam, stop! You will drive me mad if you talk like that! I have asked that girl to be my wife! Her father is willing to give her to me! I cannot go back now! I must submit to my fate!"

This was more than Miriam had expected, and for some minutes she did not speak. Then, trying to steady her voice, she said, "Happy Lillie Garnett! What a loving, devoted husband she will have!"

"Miriam, have you no pity?"

"I have quite as much for you as you have for me! Good-by!"

"Are you going? No; wait a little longer—please do!"

"Why should I remain here? It is better for us never to have anything to say to each other again."

"You are right! I suppose it is better!" Then, suddenly changing from gloomy apathy to excited vehemence, he exclaimed: "Do not go yet, Miriam! Let me have a few minutes more! I must give you up; there is no help for that! We have got to part, but don't let it be just yet!"

She hesitated for a moment, then flinging her arms round his neck, she cried, passionately, "I cannot give you up, Ralph—I cannot! I have the first right to you! You bound

yourself to me by the promises you made years ago. And loving me, you can never be happy with any one else!"

"I do not expect to be happy," he returned, gloomily; "but I have pledged my word, and I cannot break it!"

"And did you not pledge it to me? Are your vows to me to be declared as nothing because I am friendless?"

"Miriam, my poor girl," he said, gently, "what you say is very true, but at the same time we can never be anything to each other. Even were I not engaged to Lillie, I could not possibly ask my uncle to receive you as his niece! If I married you he would never forgive me; and until his death I have not a cent in the world but what he chooses to give me; and he would stop my allowance at once, then what would become of us?—for I am not only poor, but terribly in debt! Look at our position from a sensible point of view, and I am sure you must agree with me! You have been very badly used, I confess, but name any sum of money you please as atonement for the wrong I have done you, and it shall be cheerfully paid."

In a fit of uncontrollable fury, she pushed him from her.

"How dare you!" she cried,— "how dare you insult me by offering me money, as if money could give me back the love that I have been wasting on you all these years! If I were dying of hunger this very moment do you think I would take a crust offered by your bounty? I wish I could hate you as you deserve, and hate you I will, unless you take care, and then I will ruin you, Ralph Garnett; for my mother and I know some family secrets which concern you pretty nearly, and as soon as we tell what we know, you may say good-by to being heir to your uncle's property. Just by saying a few words we can make a nameless, homeless pauper of you! Yes; you may stare at me, and think me mad if you like, but every word that I am saying is perfectly true! You have no right whatever to the name you are so proud of, and I am not without plenty of proofs of it!"

"I do not believe you!" he answered, coldly enough, though her words had struck a vague fear into his heart. "There were never any family secrets which could do me any harm for you to find out! But explain what you mean, if you please! I am not good at guessing riddles! You won't? Oh, very well; I will take your threats for what they are worth! You just think to frighten me with some ridiculous invention, but I am not quite the credulous fool you take me for!"

"So you refuse to believe me," Miriam said, speaking slowly and calmly now; "but for all that, you are completely in my power,

as you will soon know to your cost. If you meet me here to-morrow night, at this same hour, you shall hear a story which I promise you will not be a very pleasant one to listen to. Mind you come; for if you don't, my mother will have something to say to Mr. Edward Garnett next morning. And you need not think that I am anxious to come to terms with you, for I am not. Even if you were to go down on your knees this very moment, and ask me to marry you, I really think I would say no. A much better man than you are wants me. He does not set up for being a gentleman, but he is honorable and truthful, and I know that I would be a great deal happier than with you. Yes, I am going to marry Joe Carter; and, oh! what a sensation there will be in the place when it is known that you are not Mr. Garnett's nephew at all!"

She laughed and turned quickly away, Ralph making no effort to detain her. For a long time he stood perfectly immovable on the spot where she had left him. Then he passed his hand two or three times across his brow, as though to convince himself that he was not dreaming.

"If she had really anything to tell, why didn't she tell it now?" he muttered. "But I don't believe she has; of course I don't."

CHAPTER IV.

A WRETCHED SECRET.

THE next day was far from being a happy one for Ralph. Incredulous as he tried to persuade himself that he was, a sense of restlessness and a presentiment of coming ill were constantly with him. All manner of possibilities kept suggesting themselves to his mind, and as evening drew near, he found it almost impossible to conceal the nervous excitement which now grew stronger every minute.

It was rather later than the hour named when he started to keep his strange appointment, for his uncle had complained of feeling far from well, and had detained him with him in his room for what seemed to him an interminable time.

The moon was hidden behind the clouds, and a thick, drizzling rain was falling as, wrought up to the highest possible pitch of excitement, he arrived at the appointed place, where he found Miriam waiting for him.

"Come with me," she said, sharply, cutting short the apology he had commenced to make; and she went on before him through the gloomy grove, crossed the bridge which spanned the river, and never once paused until they had reached her mother's cottage.

She raised the latch and entered, and he went with her into the little parlor, where her mother was sitting alone.

"So you have come! I thought you would

not disappoint me," Mrs. Shaw said, standing up as she saw him.

Mechanically he took the chair which she offered him, and glanced round the room. Miriam had disappeared. The door was shut. Mrs. Shaw had placed herself at the opposite side of the table, and the dim yellow light of a solitary lamp gave her pale face a look that was almost ghastly.

"You wished to see me, I suppose? What have you got to say to me?" he asked.

"What have you got to say to me, Mr. Garnett?"

"Your daughter spoke of some secret about me, told, I suppose, by you. I would like very much to know what it is," he said, slowly.

"Very well; you shall hear it, and it rests with yourself alone whether or not it shall be proclaimed to the whole world."

"We can talk about that afterwards. I am waiting to hear your story," Ralph exclaimed, impatiently.

"Do you know anything about your mother, Mr. Garnett?"

There was a haughty flash in Ralph's eyes, but it was only momentary.

"My uncle told me," he answered, "that she was ignorant, the daughter of a hotel-keeper; that my father married her privately, and that both my parents died about the time that I was born."

"I can tell you a great deal more than that."

"You? Did you know her?"

"I knew the girl intimately whom Victor Garnett married. My father's house was only a few minutes' walk from hers. We used to play together when we were children. We went to the same school, and if she loved anyone in the world, I really believe she loved me. She had one brother and one sister, both some years older than she was. Her mother was dead, and her father let her have her own way in everything.

"She was just nineteen, and was as lovely a girl as you could see anywhere, when Mr. Garnett got hurt shooting, and her father had him brought to his house.

"Her sister was married; her brother was a pettifogger in Albany, and people talked about such a pretty young girl being put to nurse a strange gentleman all by herself; but she and her father did not seem to mind, and kept their own counsel, so that no one knew what was going on until the morning when Mary was married to Victor Garnett in the village church."

"Ha!" exclaimed Ralph. "The marriage was quite legal, then! It cannot be disputed!"

"It was perfectly legal; but do not interrupt me, if you please. I have a good deal more to tell.

"Mr. Garnett and his bride left the place at once after the wedding, and nothing was heard of them for a long time.

"Nearly a year afterward she came back to her father's house, alone. I went to see her at once, and she told me that her husband had gone home to see his folks, and that she was to join him there when her child was born. When it came, it was such a miserable, puny little thing, that no one thought it possible it would live."

"It lived, and its mother died," Ralph said, eagerly. "What has become of your secret, now, Mrs. Shaw?"

"Wait, and you shall hear,

"His daughter's death was not the old hotel-keeper's only trial. As I told you, the elder sister had married some time before. Her husband was clerk in a large business establishment, and every one thought him a good, honest man. But he ended by robbing his employers; he was found out, stood his trial, and was sent to Sing Sing.

"His unfortunate wife came home broken-hearted, and, worse than that, her reason was quite gone. She was gentle and quiet, but she took no notice of anyone, not even of her child, which was born a few days after her sister's.

"In a couple of weeks Mrs. Garnett's brother arrived, and when he heard what had happened, he got a nurse for his little nephew, and took it away; and the afternoon of the day that he went, we heard that the poor madwoman's child was dead. It seemed very sudden, for it had never been known to be ailing; but they buried it, and people said that it was the happiest thing for it to die.

"I married very soon after that; and, when I was left a widow, with no one belonging to me but Miriam, I thought that I would like to see my poor Mary's child again. It was all the same to me where I lived, so I came here and took this cottage, and you used often to come and talk to me. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I do," Ralph answered.

"And I suppose you remember the day that you were playing with a large dog, and it bit your shoulder, and I brought you in here to see what I could do for you? When you uncovered your arm my heart almost stood still. My friend's child had a large and most peculiar mark just above the elbow. The doctor had once called my attention to it, and said, 'That child can never deny his identity. It is one of those marks that never go away. He will carry it with him to his grave!'

"Perhaps you are beginning to understand me now. There is no mark whatever on your arm!"

Ralph sprung to his feet, and began to pace the room with hasty strides,

After a little, he suddenly sat down again, leaned his elbows on the table, and covered his face with his hands.

"It cannot be true—I cannot believe it!" he murmured.

"It is perfectly true!" was the hard, pitiless reply. "I understood at once how it was, and so must you. The children were changed! The one that died was Victor Garnett's, and you are the son of the clerk, the convicted felon, and of the poor madwoman!"

"I tell you it is impossible! There must be some mistake!"

But Ralph's voice was feeble and undecided. He felt it, and he felt the contrast between his own agitation and Mrs. Shaw's calm, unruffled assurance.

"I tell you again there is no mistake," the woman went on; "and the mark which is not on your arm is not the only proof. There are plenty of people who remember your first arrival at Garnett Holm and who were quite ready to talk about you. It was a strong, healthy child that Edward Garnett brought here with him, instead of the poor miserable little creature that used to cry and scream from morning till night. The exchange was managed very cleverly, for, except me, no one ever suspected that there was anything wrong."

Ralph laughed scornfully. From the very first there had been but little doubt in his heart that her statement was true, and the less he doubted, the harder he strove to keep up a show of incredulity.

"It is a lie—a miserable, malicious lie!" he exclaimed. "It was cleverly planned, but the whole thing is too monstrous for any one in their senses to believe for a moment! The idea of your trying to impose on me with such a villainous fabrication!"

"Call it a villainous fabrication, or any other name you please, I tell you that every single word I told you is perfectly true! Twenty-four years are certainly a long time; but I have no doubt that plenty of witnesses could be found to come forward if the story once got abroad. The doctor who first noticed the mark is one, for I have found out that he is still alive. The children were changed, that is a positive fact, and you are no nephew of Edward Garnett's!"

"And why should such an exchange be made? What motive could any one have for doing it?"

"Your mother's father and brother had a very strong motive for doing it! Mr. Garnett's son was so delicate that it could not possibly live—indeed, I dare say it was dead or dying when its uncle came for it. The other was worse than an orphan, and by putting it in its cousin's place a splendid position could be

gained for it. Its mother would never miss it, for she was hopelessly mad. You may as well say you believe me; you know quite well that you do."

"I suppose I must believe you!" Ralph answered, with a groan.

There was silence for some minutes; then he asked: "Does any one else know of this, Mrs. Shaw?"

"Your mother's brother does, of course, if he happens to be alive still; but, as far as I know, I am the only person who ever suspected it."

"You have known it all these years. Why did you never tell it before?"

"Why should I have told it? As a child you never did me any harm, and it was all the same to me who Mr. Garnett's nephew was. When you were here last, I believed that I was keeping silence for Miriam's sake as well as for yours."

"And for Miriam's sake you will keep silence still, will you not?" he said, eagerly. "If you screen me, you will screen your daughter at the same time."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you must wish to see Miriam's husband in a good position."

"And who may Miriam's husband be?"

"Can you not, or will you not, understand? I mean to marry her."

"Really! Permit me to thank you for your great kindness and condescension. But are you quite sure that Miriam is willing to marry you, Mr.—well, I suppose I may as well call you Mr. Garnett for the present."

He started to his feet once more, and commenced to pace the room. His face was deadly pale, his features were working, and his hands were tightly clinched.

"I think that Miriam would be very foolish indeed to take you," Mrs. Shaw continued, "for what are you, after all, but a miserable impostor? Then, one thing more. Miriam has had an offer of marriage from Joe Carter, and I hope to see her his wife before Christmas."

"Mrs. Shaw," he cried, in desperation, "have you not one atom of mercy or pity? Am I to blame for not being what I always believed myself to be? The deception was none of my doing. And I swear to you, on my honor, that it is not only to save myself that I want to marry Miriam. I loved her years ago; you cannot deny it. I did try to forget her, I confess, and I let myself be led into an engagement with Lillie. But I do love her still, I really do. Won't you let me see her for a few minutes? I know that she will not say no to me."

"Miriam has no wish to see you," Mrs. Shaw answered, coldly. "Take my advice, and get married to your cousin—I mean to

Miss Lillie Garnett—as soon as possible; her father cannot but do something for his son-in-law, even when he finds out that you are not his nephew."

Ralph could control himself no longer; seizing the woman by the shoulder, he said, fiercely, his voice trembling with passion:

"You had better take care of yourself, Mrs. Shaw, and not speak to me like that again. If you want to trade on that miserable secret—and of course that is what you want to do—I am the only person whose interest it would be to pay you for keeping it. I am willing to make your daughter a lady, and give you as much money for yourself as you wish for. If you don't choose to accept those terms, tell your secret—yes, tell it, and spoil your chance of making a red cent by it!"

He released his grasp, and turned toward the door. Then, a sudden thought striking him, he came back to her again.

"There is one thing that I forgot to ask you," he said. "What was my mother's maiden name? I want to find her brother, and make him give me his version of the story."

The look of fear which came into her eyes surprised him. She made no attempt to answer, but sat staring vacantly at him.

"What was the name?" he questioned again; and then she roused herself.

"I will not tell you," she said. "Your meeting him could do you no good."

"What difference can that make to you?"

"None, of course. But promise me not to try and find him; nothing but harm can come of it."

"I will not promise without hearing your reasons."

"My reason is that it would do you more harm than good."

Ralph looked at her steadily.

"It seems to me that there is some new mystery here," he said.

"There is no mystery; how should there be?"

She spoke calmly enough, but Ralph was not to be easily baffled.

"There will be no difficulty in finding out the name," he said, quietly. "My uncle has hardly forgotten it. He will tell me if I ask him."

"Do not ask him, Mr. Garnett. Take my advice, and do not. Believe me, I mean well by you, and it would be far better for you not to meet."

"Perhaps it would be far better for you that he should not find you out, Mrs. Shaw!"

This was quite a random shot; but he saw how she was startled by it. Almost immediately, however, she recovered her cool, composed manner, and the ghost of a smile flitted across her face.

"Talking of the past has made me nervous," she said. "I think I must ask you to go now. Of course, if you wish to communicate with your uncle, it is nothing whatever to me; but I am almost sure that he is dead years ago. Your mother's name was Power—Mary Power—and if you intend to make inquiries about her brother, you had better begin them in Albany. He was practicing there when I heard of him last, about twenty years ago. Good-night now, Mr. Garnett."

It seemed to him that she had laid marked stress on the name which he now knew he had no right to; and the utterance of it by her lips, and in that tone, sent a thrill of pain into his heart.

"I am going," he said. "But tell me first, do we part as friends or enemies? Is there any chance of our coming to terms?"

"There may be, if Miriam will agree."

"I do not fear about Miriam."

"Do not be too sure of her. She has serious thoughts of marrying Joe Carter."

"Nonsense! She cannot possibly care for that man."

"You are wrong there. She likes him very much."

"She likes me better, to say the least of it."

"But she does not respect you, and she will hardly care to marry a man in whose honor she can have no confidence."

"Mrs. Shaw!"

"Yes; I repeat it. If you had a spark of honor, you would go to your uncle and tell him that you would keep the truth from him no longer. Go now, if you please. It is past one o'clock."

He went; and scarcely had the door closed behind him, when Miriam stood before her mother.

"Well?" she questioned. "Have you told him?"

"Yes; I told him everything."

"And he—"

"He seemed to think that by offering to marry you he was paying the highest price possible for our silence."

"And what did you say?"

"I told him that you intended to marry Joe Carter."

"That frightened him, I suppose. I expect we shall find Joe Carter rather useful, mother. The game is in our own hands now."

"It is; but, Miriam, with my approval, you never will marry Ralph Garnett. Laugh at me if you like, but I would a thousand times sooner see you Joe Carter's wife."

Miriam *did* laugh.

"Thank you, mother!" she said. "Joe Carter, the farmer, does not quite come up to my ideal of a husband."

"It is better than a swindler, farmer though he be!" exclaimed Mrs. Shaw.

"The swind'ler, as you call him, will be the owner of Garnett Holm some of these days!" was Miriam's reply.

CHAPTER V.

IN A MAZE.

THE unfortunate young man walked back to his home, feeling like one who was vainly struggling to rouse himself from some hideous dream. For the first time in his life he was brought face to face with real misfortune, and not only misfortune, but infamy and disgrace. The consciousness of his mother's humble birth had always been a sore trouble to him; but that trouble seemed a mere trifle compared with what he had now to bear.

"The son of a felon—of a low-born convict!" he kept repeating over and over again to himself, and wondering how he could ever face those who all these years had known him as Ralph Garnett if the true story of his birth were to become known.

He thought of Miriam; of how he had treated her; how, only the day before, he had explained to her the impossibility of his marrying her; how he knew that he must humble himself to the very dust before her if he would win her for his wife; and his wife she must be, for what other security could he have for the keeping of his secret? Money might purchase Mrs. Shaw's silence; marriage alone would insure Miriam's.

He thought of Lillie, his affianced bride, the girl who loved him so well. How was he to tell her? How break it to her father that their engagement, not yet twenty-four hours old, must be at an end? And at the thought of Lillie, a hopeless, yearning agony—the keenest he had yet felt—swelled up in his heart, and he almost cried out with pain.

"What am I to do? what am I to do?" he groaned, for the misery which had fallen on him seemed almost too great for human endurance, and whichever way he looked nothing but trouble and perplexity stared him in the face.

The path of duty did lie plainly enough before him; but the idea of following it never once occurred to his mind. He never for one moment reflected that he was bound in all honesty and honor to tell his uncle the entire truth, and then take the consequences bravely and manfully.

All at once he stood still. He was close to the house now, and he saw that there must be something wrong. Lights were to be seen in all directions; figures were passing and re-passing the windows; then there was a sound of wheels, and a carriage rolled past him up the avenue.

"What can be the matter?" he wondered; and hurrying on, he opened the little side door through which he had let himself out a couple

of hours before, and ran up the back stairs, hoping to reach his own room unobserved. The hall which he had to cross on his way there was quite dark and still, and he was congratulating himself on his good fortune when a light flashed into his eyes, and he saw before him Miss Gilbert, with Lillie leaning on her arm.

For some moments they stood looking at each other in silence; then Miss Gilbert said, in sneering tones, "So you have been for a midnight walk, Ralph, though it can hardly have been the beauty of the night which tempted you out."

"What right have you to spy my movements like that?" he rejoined, hotly. "And what is the meaning of my meeting you and Lillie here at this hour?"

"Your uncle is very much worse," she answered. "Naturally the servants went to your room to ask for directions; but greatly to every one's surprise—"

"Talk about that afterward," he interrupted. "Is uncle very ill, then?"

"I am afraid he is. But the doctor is with him now, and we are waiting to hear what he says."

"Will you not go to his room, Ralph?" said Lillie, speaking for the first time. "They won't let me in; and I want to know everything that the doctor says about him. Please go and find out."

He looked pityingly at her. Every trace of color had vanished from her cheeks and lips, her eyes were full of tears, and terrified apprehension showed itself plainly on her face.

"I am going at once, Lillie," he answered; "and I hope soon to bring you good news."

"Do you not think it would be advisable to put on dry clothes first?" suggested Miss Gilbert, holding the light closer to him. "You are hardly in a fit state to appear in a sick-room."

Repressing the angry retort which rose to his lips, he went into his own room, and shut the door.

"What does this mean, Miss Gilbert?" asked Lillie, in a bewildered manner. "Where could he have been at this hour of the night?"

"Don't ask me, my dear. I would much rather not tell my suspicions. Come, you must not remain here. Go back to the boudoir, and as soon as I can hear anything about your father I will let you know."

"Oh, please don't leave me alone!" cried Lillie, piteously. "I'm so frightened! I could never stay here by myself, and Frances is with papa. Oh, if I only knew how he was!" And she broke out into hysterical sobs.

Miss Gilbert led the weeping girl into the pretty little boudoir, and sat talking to her there; but Lillie paid little attention to what she was saying.

"What can be delaying Ralph? Why doesn't he come and tell us about papa?" she repeated, over and over again.

Nearly an hour passed, and at last there was a knock at the door, and Ralph entered.

"He is better now," he said, in reply to the eager questions with which he was greeted; "but we will send to New York for another doctor as soon as possible."

He had a great deal to say about his uncle, and talked quickly and nervously about him, repeating in detail all that the doctor said, endeavoring to impress them with the belief that there was nothing to be feared from this sudden attack.

Lillie looked infinitely relieved, and seemed to think of nothing but her father, and to be only anxious to hear all the details about him.

But after allowing Ralph to talk for some time, Miss Gilbert, fixing her sharp eyes inquiringly on his face, said dryly:

"It is very well that you did not remain out much longer. All the servants were wondering what could possibly have become of you. I was just on the point of proposing that some one should go in search of you."

"Where were you, Ralph?" asked Lillie.

He hesitated, and Miss Gilbert, giving one of her peculiarly disagreeable laughs, said:

"It would be better for you not to ask him, my dear. What is the use of being too inquisitive? You can see plainly that he does not wish to tell you."

"Once for all, Miss Gilbert, I will have none of this!" exclaimed Ralph, in tones which made her start visibly. "I came here to tell Lillie that her father's life is not in danger, as she feared; and instead of being thankful, you are doing your best to make mischief between us about a mere trifle. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Miss Gilbert laughed again. Ralph's anger only served to convince her all the more that there was something wrong; but she did not care to open war with him just then, and said, as she stood up:

"Perhaps it is a mere trifle; and at any rate, it will do Lillie no good to fret about it. I really think the poor child ought to go to bed now; she will be quite ill to-morrow."

The proposition pleased Ralph well, and he said, eagerly, "Yes, you are right; there is no need for her to remain up any longer. And, Lillie,"—there was a nervous hesitation in his voice as he spoke—"don't let any thoughts about me trouble you. Some time, when we are alone, I will give you any explanation you may wish for."

Her face brightened as she heard his words; but before she had time to speak, Miss Gilbert said, "It seems to me that your explanation ought to be heard by all that know of your very peculiar escapade. However, if you and

Lillie are satisfied, no one else need care. Good-night. Come, Lillie." And Lillie, without showing the slightest inclination to linger, left the room with her.

"That old woman is unbearable," muttered Ralph, as he returned to Mr. Garnett's room. "If it had not been for her, not a word would have been said about my being out, and I could easily have found a good excuse. But trust her to make a regular fuss about it. If they find out where I was, it will be all up with me, and there will be a regular break with uncle Edward; and yet—"

He stood still and drew a long, deep breath. If he married Miriam, such a break was inevitable; and a break with him meant absolute penury. But supposing his uncle did not recover—and there was every possibility that this illness might terminate fatally—and when he thought of the many difficulties that the old man's death would clear out of his way, he almost wished that he might die.

He found Frances sitting beside her father, very pale, but very quiet, and self-possessed. The doctor had gone. The housekeeper, a kind-faced, motherly woman, was the only other person in the room, and she gave Ralph a look of anything but welcome as he came in.

"Please don't make any noise," she said, in a whisper. "He is asleep now."

With cautious tread, Ralph advanced into the room, and stood watching the sleeper. Though evidently no longer conscious of pain, his uncle's face had an unnatural, unquiet look; his breathing was irregular, and now and then a low moan escaped his lips.

Ralph shuddered; a great lump rose up in his throat. A wild longing seized him to fling himself on his knees, and give full vent to the sobs which it almost choked him to suppress. He did really love his uncle—how much, he had hardly ever realized before—but he was lost to him now; if he lived, even more so than if he died.

"He'll wake up if you stare at him much longer like that, Mr. Ralph," the housekeeper said, pettishly.

Ralph, roused from his meditations by her words, turned away from the bed.

"There is no need for you to remain here any longer," he said to Frances; "I am going to sit up with him."

"You are very kind; but Mrs. Brown and I are going to do that."

"I cannot hear of such a thing. You will be quite worn out. You must go to bed—indeed you must, Frances."

"There is no danger of my being worn out, and I do not wish to leave him."

"But if I am here—"

"You can please yourself about remaining; but there is nothing for you to do now."

There was something like contempt in her voice, and he felt that he would far rather she had spoken to him as Miss Gilbert had done.

When he could have been of use he was not to be found; now, he was not wanted.

The sick man lay quiet and still; the lamp was burning low; the two women sat close together, distinction between mistress and servant being forgotten for the time; and Ralph, sullenly determined not to be driven away, ensconced himself in an arm-chair in the darkest corner that he could find.

Perhaps there is no more suitable place for reflection than the unbroken quiet of a night-watch in a sick room.

Sentence by sentence almost he went through his conversation with Mrs. Shaw; link by link he followed up the chain of evidence which proved the truth of her statement. Her account of Victor Garnett's marriage, the birth of his son, the death of his wife, the father's brother coming to fetch the child, tallied exactly with that given him by Edward Garnett.

Either it was plain, unvarnished truth, or a wonderfully clever fabrication; for there was no contradiction, nothing whatever improbable, in the entire narration.

He was no Garnett; he felt it; he knew it.

Often he had heard it remarked, and he had often wondered at it himself, how it was that his features bore no resemblance whatever to those of his supposed ancestors, whose portraits hung in the gallery.

Among the Garnetts there had always been a strong family likeness.

He was the only exception, and he now understood the reason why.

Had it been possible, he would have disbelieved Mrs. Shaw's statement; but to do so was utterly beyond his power, and every plan which suggested itself to his mind was formed on the conviction that what she had said was true.

The resolution to which he at last came was this:

He would await the result of his uncle's illness as patiently as possible. If he died, he would be his own master—free to do just as he pleased; if he lived, he must win Miriam's consent to a private marriage; and in either case he must set himself to find some pretext for a quarrel with Lillie—not just yet, of course; for how could he have the heart to bring this new trouble on her while her father's life was hourly in the balance?

CHAPTER VI.

NO ALTERNATIVE.

EDWARD GARNETT did not die, though for a few days his life hung, as it were, by a single thread.

At the end of a week the doctors were able to give it as their confident opinion that he was steadily, though slowly recovering.

During that week Ralph had neither seen Miriam nor had heard any tidings from her; and though under the same roof with Lillie, they had rarely been alone for more than a few minutes at a time.

With a devotion which forced Frances to like him far better than she had ever done before, he hardly ever quitted the sick-room, scarcely even allowing himself time to snatch a hasty meal.

It was past six o'clock. The rain which had been falling heavily all day was over now, and the evening sun was shining brightly. Mr. Garnett was much better, and Ralph for the first time since the beginning of his illness had declared his intention of going out for half an hour or so.

But his walk was not to be without an object; no more time must be suffered to pass in inaction; and he had made up his mind to see Miriam that evening, and come to some definite arrangement with her.

To the Shaws' cottage, therefore, he was about to direct his steps; but just as he was crossing the hall, Lillie met him.

"Are you going out?" she asked.

He had his hat in his hand, so had no alternative but to acknowledge that he was, and Lillie's face brightened.

"It is a lovely evening," she said; "I think I will go with you. My head has been aching all day; I am sure the air would do it good. Yes, I must go out for a while."

"But the places are all so wet, Lillie," he objected.

She looked at him suspiciously, and turning away, said, coldly, "I see that you do not want me, so, of course, I have no wish to intrude my society on you. I wish you a pleasant walk, Mr. Garnett."

"Nonsense, Lillie! You know I would only be too delighted to have you with me, if I thought there was no danger of your taking cold."

"What danger could there possibly be? But I dare say you would rather go alone."

"Now, Lillie, that is really too bad. Get ready as quickly as you can; I will wait here for you."

Well pleased at the prospect of a walk with him, she ran up-stairs; but how different would have been her feelings could she have seen the vexed expression on his face as he waited for her.

"Ralph," she said, passing her arm through his as they walked slowly down the avenue, "I wish you would tell me where you were the night that papa got ill. Miss Gilbert said that the servants talked a great deal about it. You must have been away for nearly two hours;

and then you were so angry when she questioned you."

"Of course I was angry, because I am not accountable to her for my actions. And, Lillie, I warn you, that you and I will fall out if you pay so much heed to everything that people say about me. I went out that night to meet a friend of mine, an old school-fellow. He had got into trouble, poor fellow, and had to leave the country, and he wanted to see me once before he went. I forgot the time talking to him; so there is the explanation of the whole business."

He spoke quickly, and without hesitation; but he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself as he uttered this plausible falsehood, and saw how implicitly Lillie believed him.

"Oh, I am so glad you told me!" she exclaimed. "But why did you make such a secret of it?"

"For my friend's sake I did not want it known; he was in trouble, as I told you, and he did not want any one to hear of his being in the neighborhood."

"But you will tell it now, will you not?"

"I will do no such thing. Fancy my making excuses to the servants!"

"But Miss Gilbert, Ralph?"

"Miss Gilbert is miles away, and I am heartily thankful for it."

"But may I not write to her?—and, Ralph, if you would do it, it would be ever so much better."

"Most decidedly not! It is no business of hers, and I do not wish her to have the satisfaction of getting an explanation. And if I find you listening to her malicious gossip again, I will be very angry with you! Promise me that in the future you will trust me a little more."

"I will promise anything you like," exclaimed Lillie, "only don't be angry with me any more. Indeed, I did not mean to vex you; but, oh! I have been so miserable ever since that night—I could not help it!"

His heart smote him as he looked down at the upturned, penitent face, and into the loving, trusting blue eyes, moistened with tears as they were now. He knew how fondly she loved him, and how utterly unworthy he was of that love, and his conscience urged him to deceive her no longer, but to tell her honestly that henceforth they must be nothing to each other.

They had turned off from the avenue to one of the side paths, and as he stood before her, holding both her hands in his, they seemed perfectly secure from observation.

"Lillie," he said, hoarsely, "if anything should happen to part us, would you mind very much?"

"I would rather die than lose you!" she exclaimed; and releasing her hands from his, she clasped them round his neck.

"Plenty of people have loved each other, as they thought, better than life, and they had to part. They forgot each other, and were just as happy as ever again in a short time."

"I cannot understand that, Ralph. I never could be happy again if I was parted from you."

"Others have thought the same thing; but they found out their mistake, and then in after years they wondered how they could have been so foolish."

"Ralph, I cannot understand you," the poor child cried out piteously. "It was only last week that you told me how much you cared for me, and you are talking now as if you were sorry for it. What has happened? What is going to happen to make you say such things?"

She looked up at him, her tearful eyes so full of fear and entreating love, that his courage failed him, and he felt it quite beyond his power to undeceive her just then.

He would put off the wedding a little while, and not make her miserable before it was absolutely necessary. Besides, were he to ask her to release him from his engagement, her father must be told of it, and who could tell what effect such a shock might have on him in his present critical state of health.

"Nothing is going to happen, darling," he said, drawing her closer to him, and bending his head to kiss the fair, innocent young face. "Silly child, to fancy that I did not love her! Oh, Lillie, you must never doubt that I love you—never!"

With many more tender words he reassured her, in the end almost persuading himself that he was speaking the truth, and feeling far more certain that he loved her than ever he had done before.

There was a sound of footsteps. They appeared to be coming nearer, and Ralph drew Lillie quickly aside from the path.

"Let us wait here until those people pass," he said. "Stand still and they will not notice us."

Lillie raised no objection. Conscious as she was of her tear stained face, she did not wish to encounter any one, either friends or strangers, just then.

The steps came nearer, and the deep tones of a man's voice made themselves distinctly heard.

"I know that you are ever so much too good for me," he was saying. "I am nothing, after all, but a rough, plain-spoken man, and I don't know the way to please and flatter women as others do; but for all that, I am sure I could make you happy—indeed I am, Miriam."

"I know that, Joe," Miriam answered, in a low voice.

They were within a few feet of the spot where Ralph and his companion stood con-

cealed, when, stopping suddenly, and laying both hands on Miriam's shoulders, Joe Carter said, firmly, "Let me have your answer now, Miriam. You have had quite time enough to make up your mind. 'Tis over a month since I spoke to you first. You have no right to keep me waiting like that. Let it be 'I will' or 'I won't' at once."

Ralph had been holding Lillie's hand in his, but now let it fall, and moved a step or two from her.

From his hiding-place he could see the pair on the pathway distinctly, and hear every word which was spoken.

Miriam pressed her lips tightly together, her brows contracted, and then raising her eyes for a moment to Joe's face, and letting them fall almost immediately, she said, "You have been very kind and patient; but wait one day—just one day more."

"I suppose I must," he said, resignedly; then a flash of hope lighting up his face, he added, "But I know you are going to be kind to me to-morrow, Miriam. You wouldn't be so cruel as to keep me waiting and hoping like this for nothing."

Miriam made no answer.

"Come away; please do," Lillie whispered.

Ralph started at her voice, and the strange look on his face frightened her.

"Yes, come away," he said. "Of course she means to take him, and we may as well leave the poor fools to the enjoyment of their folly."

And he hurried along so quickly that Lillie had no small difficulty in keeping pace with him. Soon they came out on another part of the same rather winding pathway, and looking round him, and drawing a long breath, he said, "There is no sign of the loving couple. They must have turned back, I think. I only hope we shall not come on them again. Such encounters are far from pleasant."

Lillie looked at him wonderingly. She saw that he was strongly agitated, but she shrunk from asking him any questions. Indeed, he hardly gave her time to say a word, but talked and laughed as though in the highest possible spirits, without, however, appearing to expect the slightest possible response from her, until, at a sharp turn in the pathway, they came face to face with Joe Carter and Miriam Shaw.

All four stood still. Ralph changed color like a school-girl; but Joe Carter, politely removing his hat, said, "I heard this afternoon that Mr. Garnett was a good deal better. I hope it is true, Miss Lillie."

"Thank you, he is a good deal better, Mr. Carter," answered Lillie.

"Everybody has been in great trouble about him," the young farmer continued; "but now I trust he may be spared to us for many a long year. Good-evening, Miss Lillie."

"Good-evening, Mr. Carter."

And they passed each other by, neither Miriam nor Ralph having spoken a word.

Lillie was troubled. Before, she had her suspicions; now, she was sure that something was wrong with her lover. What Miss Gilbert had said about his flirtation with Miriam Shaw was not forgotten, and all her former suspicions, which had only been partially allayed, revived.

"He must have loved her," she thought; "and he told me an untruth when he said he never did, and I can't help fancying that he cares a little for her still."

She longed to question him, but she dared not. All his forced gayety had vanished. His head was sunk, his eyes moodily fixed on the ground, and he did not speak again until he reached the house.

As they came into the hall, he said abruptly, "I have a wretched headache, Lillie. I must lie down for a while."

Every trace of color left the girl's face.

"Oh, Ralph, are you going to be ill, too?" she exclaimed. "Doctor Raymond is coming here again this evening, and you must have him to see you; you really must."

Ralph smiled faintly, and shook his head.

"It is nothing of any consequence," he said; "but I will lie down for a couple of hours. I have not had much sleep for the last few nights; that has knocked me up a little."

"Then you must not sit up with papa to-night."

"I will see how he is. If I am wanted, of course I must do it."

"Then, at all events, try to sleep for awhile now. Lock your door, and I will give directions that no one is to disturb you for some hours at least."

Pausing at Mr. Garnett's door, Ralph inquired whether there was any change in the condition of the patient; and having assured himself that there was no probability of his being needed for the present he went to his own room, but not to rest, as he had told Lillie; for, having waited until the twilight deepened a little more, he crept out and took his way to the Shaws' cottage.

As one well accustomed to the place, he slipped round to one side of the building, where there was another window to the sitting-room besides that looking out on the road. The blind was not drawn down, and there was light within.

Miriam was sitting at the table near the lamp, and Ralph could almost distinguish the pattern of the lace at which she was working. With his chair drawn close to hers, but evidently talking to her mother, was Joe Carter, and Mrs. Shaw had laid down her knitting to look up at him and answer him.

Ralph stood watching the group, every

nerve throbbing with impatience. Every moment he remained away from home increased the danger that his absence might be discovered, and here was the precious time slipping away in tedious waiting.

There was an old-fashioned, eight-day clock in one corner of the room, and the hands swept on until they pointed to nine. It struck, and Ralph thought that Joe must surely go now, for he had over two miles to walk to his farm, but it was nearly half-past before he stood up to say good-night. He shook hands with Mrs. Shaw, then he and Miriam left the room together. Ralph quitting his post by the window and creeping nearer to the corner of the cottage, saw them standing just outside the door.

There was a long, low conversation, which he thought would never come to an end; but at last the final good-night was said, and Miriam was left alone.

Scarcely had Joe gone half a dozen steps down the road when the unseen watcher stepped forward and called the girl by name.

"You here!" Miriam exclaimed. "What do you want?"

"Don't talk so loud," he said. "I want particularly to speak to you, and I have been waiting for more than an hour for that man to go. Come into the arbor with me, Miriam—the arbor where we used so often to sit together."

"I shall do no such thing," she answered, decidedly; "what you have to say can be said in the house."

"But your mother—"

"She being there cannot make any difference."

"I tell you I must speak to you alone."

"Then you must wait until another time."

She had raised her voice, purposely it seemed to him, and Mrs. Shaw coming out of the sitting-room, asked what the matter was.

"I came to know whether I might not have a few minutes' private conversation with Miriam," Ralph answered.

There was a significant glance between mother and daughter, then the former said:

"Come in, if you wish. I shall be busy in the kitchen for the next hour."

So saying, she disappeared down the passage, and Miriam going back into the sitting-room, took up her work again, looking quite unconcerned.

"Please put away that work," Ralph cried, impatiently; "I want you to listen to me, and you are giving all your attention to it."

She looked critically at the last few stitches she had made, then slowly folding it up, she laid it in her work-basket.

"Well, what is it?" she asked.

"I want you to tell me plainly whether you intend to marry me or that lover you have had

here with you all the evening?" Ralph said, speaking quickly and nervously. "Your mother tried to persuade me that you were thinking seriously of it, but I would not believe her; I cannot even believe now that you could ever bring yourself to do such a thing."

"What she told you about Joe Carter is perfectly true," Miriam answered, coldly. "I am all but engaged to him."

"Can it be that you love him?"

"If I did not, I certainly never would agree to marry him. But what business is this of yours, may I ask? What interest can you have for me?"

"Joe is nothing to me; but you are, Miriam. I want to find out what you really intend to do, whether or not you are willing to keep the faith which you plighted to me years ago?"

"In other words, you want to find out what the chances are of our never making any unpleasant revelations about you," was Miriam's sneering rejoinder.

"No; I give you my word it is not that. I ask you to be my wife, Miriam, because—because I love you."

"Do you love me more now than you did on a certain evening when you gave me such good reasons for not offering to make me your wife?"

"What is the use of referring to the past?" he cried. "If I did not love you, no earthly consideration could induce me to come to you with such a request."

"Do you think you can make me believe that? It seems to me that you are influenced by some very strong earthly considerations. What else could have made you change your plans so quickly? But of course the girl whom Ralph Garnett could not possibly stoop to marry is quite good enough for the felon's son!"

He sprung to his feet and stood before her; his arms folded, his face white with passion.

"You had better take care," he cried, vehemently. "Do not try me too much; a few more remarks like that, and I shall not be master of my actions. I have come here to renew the offer which I made you years ago, which I repeated to your mother last week. Choose, now, if you will take that price for your secret. If not, what else will you have from me? What sum of money do you want? Joe Carter, I fear, has not chosen a portionless bride?"

"No money of yours can buy our silence, you may be sure of that!"

Ralph drew a long breath, and his face grew very set and hard.

"Then are you willing to marry me?" he asked.

"You forget that I have another alternative left," Miriam said, with unruffled composure.

"I mean the pleasure of telling Mr. Edward Garnett the story you heard from my mother."

"Are you anxious for revenge?"

"Perhaps I am."

"Then take it," exclaimed Ralph—"take it, and let the truth be known; I will be glad of it, for anything must be better than the misery I have gone through for the last week. Do your worst; enjoy your mean, pitiful revenge to the utmost. I have done with you now, and I am thankful for it!"

He turned to go, but at the door he paused; he hesitated, and came back to her again. The momentary impulse which had spurred him on to dare her to betray him was fast dying out, and he repented already of his hasty words.

"Is there any chance for me, Miriam?" he asked. "Surely vengeance cannot be sweeter than everything else in the world?"

"It is sweeter than everything except love; and your love for me is dead," Miriam answered.

"It is not dead!" Ralph protested, eagerly. "It is as strong—no, a thousand times stronger than ever!"

She looked searchingly up into his eyes.

"Will you tell me that you care for me, and for me only—that Lillie Garnett is nothing to you?" she asked.

He quailed for a moment before her gaze, then he exclaimed, "How often must I repeat the same thing? You know I love you, Miriam!"

"And Lillie Garnett?"

"She is nothing to me."

"Are you perfectly sure?"

"Yes; perfectly sure."

"Then I will take you at your word, Ralph;" and she held out her hand to him.

When, half an hour later, Ralph came out of the cottage, he knew that all danger of their betraying his secret was at an end; but his heart felt as heavy as a lump of lead in his breast.

"The Shaws have left the place, Mr. Garnett," Edward Garnett's manager said to Ralph a few days later. "They sent me the key and the rent up to the end of the quarter. That was the first I heard of it, and no one seems to know why they went or where they have gone to."

"They certainly are very strange people—very strange!" Ralph said, looking straight before him.

"Some say that Mrs. Shaw hoped Joe Carter would marry her daughter," the man continued. "Perhaps they did not care to remain there when they found they had no chance of him."

"Perhaps not," said Ralph.

CHAPTER VII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

"CAN you spare me half an hour or so of your time, Corran? I am rather badly off for some advice, etc."

The speaker was Ralph Garnett: the person addressed an elderly man, with grizzled hair and a sharp, cunning face.

The room in which they found themselves was a small, dingy apartment, furnished as an office, and looking out in a narrow, back New York street.

James Corran, nominally a pettifogger, was one who proved himself very useful to those of his clients who stood in need of ready money, and to Ralph Garnett he was no stranger, as the young man rarely came to the city without paying a visit to his office.

"My time is at your disposal, Mr. Garnett," the attorney said, standing up from his writing-table, and offering Ralph a chair. "You want money, I presume?"

"Indeed I do! Can you let me have five hundred?"

"Five hundred!" Corran repeated, slowly. "That is a good deal Mr. Garnett, and it is only about six weeks since—"

"Oh, there, now: don't preach, if you please!" interrupted Ralph. "I must have the money—and that ends the matter. And, Corran, since you know so much about my private affairs, I may as well take you a little further into my confidence. I have got married since I saw you last."

"Hal have you? I am very glad to hear it. Of course it is to one of your cousins?"

"No; that's just it. I have married a poor girl—for love!"

"Fool!" muttered Corran, under his breath. Then, appearing to recollect himself, he added, apologetically, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Garnett! We business men deal in prudence more than sentiment. And what does your uncle say to the match you have made?"

"He knows nothing whatever about it."

"A private marriage, then? That's bad—very bad!"

"Of course you think so! But allow me to remark that I did not ask you to criticise my conduct, Mr. Corran!" Ralph said, haughtily. "I have taken a house for my wife. I must pay for that, and I must have money to support her. Can you let me have the sum I named by to-morrow?"

"I will see about it."

"Thanks, ever so much!" Ralph exclaimed, his sudden flash of haughtiness vanishing as quickly as it had come. "Do you know, Corran, you really have been very good to me. How I could have pulled along all this time without your help, I hardly know. Sometimes I have caught myself fancying that you

must have a heart, and that I had contrived to find my way to it. It was a lucky day for me that I fell into your hands, instead of into those of some money-lender, who would have had me ruined long ago."

A softened look came into the old man's face as he said, "'Tis only human to have likes and dislikes, I suppose, and I always liked you, Mr. Garnett. But, now, about this marriage of yours. Will you not tell me something more, and who the lady is?"

Ralph laughed, somewhat bitterly it seemed to the lawyer, as he pushed his chair still further back into the shade.

"Oh, there's not much to tell," he said. "I told you she was a poor girl. I knew her years ago, and got engaged to her. My uncle wanted me to take one of his daughters. I thought I could give Miriam up, and promised to do as he wished; but it was no use, and I married her just a fortnight ago."

"I must admit that I am very sorry to hear this."

"What is the use of being sorry? The deed is done now, and cannot be helped. You will have the money for me to-morrow, won't you? And Corran, before I go, there is something I want to ask you. Could you possibly find out anything for me about a lawyer named Power? He lived in Albany some twenty-four years ago."

James Corran looked thoughtful, and rather puzzled.

"Power lived in Albany twenty-four years ago! That is rather vague. Can you give me no other clew?" he said.

"None, except that he was a keeper's son."

"Had he anything to do with your mother's family?" Corran asked, quickly.

Ralph started and changed color, and Corran continued: "I think I see what you want. But are you quite certain the name was Power?"

"Yes. But, stay! The person who told me did not seem to wish me to find him, and she may have told me a wrong name."

"That may be. Was the man you speak of your mother's brother?"

Even to the very lips, Ralph's face grew white.

"Yes, he was," he said. "Corran, do you know anything of my mother?"

"I do. Have you been hearing anything particular about her lately?"

"I have."

"And in connection with your birth?" asked Corran, eagerly.

"Yes. Merciful heavens! do you know that, too?"

"I know it, too. But who told you? I thought the secret was mine."

"I heard it from my wife's mother."

"And who is she? What is her name?"

"I have not an idea what her real name is, but when she was a girl she and Victor Garnett's wife were bosom friends."

Like an enraged animal, the man sprung on Ralph, and seized his arm in a grasp so sudden and vise-like, that he almost screamed with pain.

"She is Mary Thompson!" he exclaimed. "I have found her at last! Curse her!—yes, curse her, I say! And her daughter is your wife! Yours, Ralph—yours? Oh, no, no; that would be something too dreadful!"

"Who are you?" gasped Ralph, as he struggled to free himself. "What does all this mean?"

"It means that I am your uncle—your mother's brother."

"You?" cried Ralph—"you?"

Corran suddenly regained his composure, and drawing himself up, and folding his arms, said:

"Yes; I am your uncle, and I dare say you feel thoroughly ashamed of your new-found relation. For all that, you have me and me only to thank for being what you are. Your name, your position, and your prospects are all of them my giving. I have watched over you all your life, and helped you through many a difficulty. I never grudged you as much as you required of my hard earned money. Your own lips have spoken of my kindness to you hardly more than five minutes ago."

"There is such a thing as mistaken kindness," Ralph said, sullenly. "But for your meddling, I would not have been the miserable wretch I am this day!"

"A miserable wretch, and only just married!" cried Corran, with a strong inflection of sarcasm in his voice.

"Yes!" thundered Ralph; "and your confounded bungling is the cause of it all! Why did you not either leave matters as they were, or manage them a little better than you did? That woman, Mary Thompson—Shaw, or whatever her name is—knew what you had done, and I had to choose between marrying her daughter or having the whole story blazed abroad. I was engaged to Lillie Garnett, one of the dearest, sweetest girls that ever lived, and that unfortunate girl believes I am true to her. Her father never dreams but that I am going to marry her. She put her arms around my neck, and kissed me, and begged of me to promise to come back to her as soon as ever I could, the morning of the day I came to New York—my wedding-day. See what your kindness has done for me! Yet you tell me I ought to feel grateful to you."

"If you had only come to me before you married her! Oh, Ralph, why did you not come to me first?"

Fiercely and wrathfully, Ralph turned on him.

"And what could you have done for me?" he demanded. "Was I not wholly and entirely in the power of those two women? They would not even wait or give me breathing time. 'It must be at once or not at all,' they said. It was always, 'Oh, very well; do just as you please yourself, and Edward Garnett shall hear all to-morrow!' I felt that I must end it somehow, for it was more than flesh and blood could bear; so they came to New York, and I followed them. They were waiting for me; they had the clergyman engaged; they had the license ready; and I had as little chance of escape as the sentenced wretch from the hands of the hangman!"

For some minutes Corran made no rejoinder, then he muttered:

"And how do you intend to support yourself and your wife?"

"Borrow until I come in for the property."

"Borrow from me, do you mean?"

"I suppose so."

"Don't be too sure that I will lend you anything."

"Oh, Corran, you're not going to leave me in the lurch like that? If you won't help me, I don't know what is to become of us," exclaimed Ralph, piteously.

"I am willing to keep you, if you will take my advice."

"And what may your advice be?"

"In the first place, you must not breathe a word to your wife and her mother about having found me; in the second, you must let your engagement to Edward Garnett's daughter still hold good."

"I cannot do that, Corran. Think of the villainy of deceiving that poor girl any longer."

"You will let it still hold good," continued the lawyer; "for if I discover that it is at an end, and that you have quarreled with Mr. Garnett, you will have to quarrel with me at the same time."

"I suppose you must have your way," Ralph said; "but you are terribly hard on me. I wish I had had the sense to keep my own counsel, and not make matters ten times worse by coming to you."

"I don't think you will be sorry by and by that you came to me. And let me give you a piece of information about your marriage. You are not Ralph Garrett; her name is not Shaw. That woman is no more your wife than she is mine."

"Not my wife!" Ralph repeated slowly.

Then, standing up and walking quickly to and fro in the room, he added, in rapid, excited tones:

"You are talking nonsense, Corran—utter nonsense!"

The other stood up, too, and laid his brown, thin hand on Ralph's shoulder.

"Listen to me," he said. "There is one

person in the world that I hate with all my heart, and that person is Mary Thompson. I was not much older than you are now when she made a fool of me, and then jilted me, and I swore that if ever I had the chance of paying her off I would not let it go by. Her daughter is not going to be mistress of Garnett Holm, I can tell you, for if ever you acknowledge her as your wife, I'll tell who you really are. Leave those two for me to deal with. Go back to your friends, Ralph; marry Lillie Garnett. Mary Thompson and her daughter will never trouble you again."

Ralph drew himself up to his full height, and with a gesture of loathing shook off Corran's hand.

"I am not such a scoundrel as you take me for!" he cried. "If that is the only advice you can give me, I want none of it!"

And so saying, he strode out of the office.

He really meant what he said; but, for all that, the next day saw him in the office again, for he was sorely in need of money; and Corran, without making any allusion to the conversation of yesterday, gave him a portion of what he asked for, telling him to call again for the remainder.

"He'll give in yet," he said to himself, as the young man, cordially shaking hands with him, thanked him warmly for his kindness. "All I have to do is to let him alone and give him time to get tired of her. He is just like his unfortunate father—obstinate enough, but weak, very weak."

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW WILL IT END?

It was a cold, disagreeable evening toward the middle of October. The blinds were drawn down and the lamps were lighted in the little rooms which Ralph had taken for his wife. There was a fire in the grate of the tiny drawing-room. Miriam had just stood up to push the lamp further away from the sofa on which she had been sitting. Then, instead of returning to her place, she came and stood beside her husband, who, one elbow leaning on the mantelpiece, was gazing moodily down at the blazing coal.

"How grave and silent you are, Ralph!" she said. And passed her hand—a strong, firm white hand—through his arm, and he suffered her to lead him to the sofa. She nestled up close to him, and looking up into his face, asked:

"What is it, Ralph? Please tell me!"

"I was thinking of how long it was since I left home."

"A month—just one month to-day," Miriam said, as she glanced down at the wedding-ring on her hand.

For they had been a month married now,

these two, and it was more than a fortnight since the evening on which Ralph, returning from his first visit to Corran, had surprised Miriam with so many unwonted professions of love and fidelity; but after that evening he began constantly to fall into spells of gloomy silence, like the one from which she had just roused him, and often, too, a heavy cloud would hang on his brow, which she had no power to dispel. Such a cloud was there now, and there was a look of worried, anxious care on his face, as he said: "Yes, an entire month, and I promised faithfully to be away for a week only. I am afraid I must leave you for a few days, Miriam. I found a letter from my uncle at my club this afternoon. He is beginning to get quite annoyed with me for remaining in New York so long. I cannot afford to fall out with him, for that would put an end to our money supplies."

Miriam made no answer. A great, choking lump came swelling up in her throat, and a blinding mist filled her eyes. She had obtained her heart's desire—the man whom she so passionately loved was hers—her ambitious hopes seemed certain of fulfillment. But she found it very hard to submit to the thought that he moved in a world into which he dared not bring her; and that he was about to leave her alone, while he went to friends who loved and valued him, but who would have hated and despised her. Moreover, he was going to the girl who believed she had every right to look on him as her lover and future husband; and how could she tell what comparisons he might make between the fair young aristocrat and the low born woman whom he had been forced to wed? She had agreed with Ralph as to the expediency of keeping their marriage a profound secret. The deceit practiced on Lillie Garnett caused her conscience little unrest; but the jealousy which had sprung up in her heart the night when she had seen Lillie and Ralph standing together in the moonlight lived there still.

"I am afraid you will be very lonely without me," Ralph said, gently; "but it will only be for a short time, and we must persuade your mother to come and stay with you until I come back. Shall we go to-morrow together and ask her?"

"Very well. And when are you going?" said Miriam, making a great effort to speak steadily.

"To-morrow afternoon. The sooner I go the sooner I can get back; and I want to be with you again by the end of the week."

"They will not let you."

"Do you think they could keep me from you?"

"No!" Miriam exclaimed, raising her head proudly. "Even her smiles and sweet blue

eyes were not able to keep you from me before, and I can laugh at her and pity her now as much as I please. Poor Lillie Garnett!"

With a shudder, Ralph moved away from her, and Miriam, watching him, laughed mockingly.

"I fear I have touched a tender point," she said. "You do not like to hear your cousin spoken of lightly."

"Miriam, I cannot understand you!" he cried, in passionate indignation. "It comes ill from you to remind me of my miserable entanglements, and yet you seem to take delight in speaking of the wrong that I am doing to to that unfortunate girl."

"What a tender conscience you must have! But I suppose it is only by degrees that I can expect to discover my husband's many virtues," sneered Miriam.

"Silence!" he thundered. "Are you a woman or a fiend, that you can speak like that? I have given up everything that a man of honor holds dear; I have played the part of a low, lying, calculating villain; and it is all your doing. Can you not be content with your work, or do you intend to torture both yourself and me, until you succeed in stamping out any spark of manliness or honor I may have left? Do I belong less to you because I cannot make a jest about that poor innocent child? I tell you plainly, Miriam, that at this moment I almost hate you!"

She trembled. She knew that she had ventured too far, and that henceforth she must put some curb on her jealousy.

Humbly and penitently she besought him to forgive her, and soon—outwardly at least—there was peace between them; but while she was congratulating herself on having appeased his anger so easily, he was admitting for the first time that the temptation to fall in with Corran's plans was a terribly strong one.

CHAPTER IX.

A HOPELESS LOVE.

"THE train must be very late, Frances; he ought to be here now," said Lillie Garnett, who was standing by the drawing-room window, anxiously watching for the return of the carriage which had been sent to fetch Ralph from the station, some two miles distant.

"It is only seven o'clock," Frances answered; "he may not be here for the next half-hour." And she crossed the room to arrange the cushions in her father's arm-chair, for her quick ears had caught the sound of his steps in the hall.

Mr. Garnett came in, leaning on the arm of his valet; for, though still rather feeble, he was again able to join the family party.

"What is the matter, Lillie?" he asked as the girl dashed past him. "Oh, I see; there is the

carriage. She will be happy again now that she has Ralph back."

As the carriage stopped, the first object which caught Ralph's eye was the pretty, girlish figure waiting to greet him on the steps before the door.

"So you *have* come at last!" she said, gladly, as—rather slowly, it seemed to her—he came up the steps. "I mean to give you a great scolding for having deserted us so long, Mr. Truant, and we will never let you go away again if you do not promise faithfully to behave better. But come into the drawing-room; papa is there."

"And am I to have a scolding from him, too?" asked Ralph, pausing at the door of the room.

"If you are duly penitent, I will try to make peace for you," Lillie answered. "Are you, sir?"

"Penitent?—that I am!" Ralph said, with far more earnestness than the occasion seemed to require. And as he spoke, he stooped and kissed her.

"Welcome home, my dear boy!" exclaimed his uncle, cordially, holding out his hand. "We have missed you very much while you were away. Ask Lillie; she will tell you how lonely we were. There, don't stand talking now. The dinner will be ready in a few minutes; you had better go and get ready."

When Ralph came down-stairs again, he found that there had been an addition to the party. Engaged in an animated conversation with Edward Garnett was a tall, dark-haired man, powerfully built, and with a look of unmistakable power and intellect on his face. His age might have been twenty-eight or thirty, but he had the appearance of one on whom the cares and responsibilities of life sat rather heavily—of one who was working hard to win a high position, and who had found the battle not an easy one.

There was very little pleasure in Ralph's face as he recognized him; and no wonder, for that man was Hugh Garnett, son of a distant cousin of theirs and a fancied rival.

Hugh had no private means of his own, having inherited little save a legacy of debts from his father; but choosing the law as his profession, he had worked his way with steady perseverance, and had now fair hopes of ultimate success.

At Garnett Holm he was always sure of meeting with a hearty welcome, for he was a great favorite of Mr. Garnett's, and of late he had come there very often.

The two young men shook hands, exchanged a few words of casual politeness, and then Ralph turned to Lillie.

"Is he staying here?" he asked, in a low, irritated voice.

"He only came yesterday, and I think he is going away to-morrow," Lillio answered. "Why do you look so cross?—do you not like him?"

"I never could see much to like in him," was Ralph's reply.

"I thought I should find you here among your flowers," Hugh Garnett said to Frances, a couple of hours later, coming up to where she was standing in the conservatory, picking off the withered blossoms from a magnificent plant of pure white heath.

"I come here very often," she answered, going on steadily with her work. "There! do you not think I have improved this heath a little?"

"But, Frances, what are you doing? That spray is quite perfect, and you have broken it off. You are spoiling the plant."

Frances colored, and laughed nervously.

"I am not going to attempt any more gardening in the presence of so severe a critic," she said. "Shall we go back to the drawing-room?"

"No; sit down here; I want to say a few words to you."

She did as he bade her, and waited to hear what he would say.

"Your father was speaking about you to me to-day," he answered, and then stopped rather abruptly.

"About me?" Frances repeated, faintly.

"Yes; about you and Captain Osborne."

Frances caught in her breath.

"I wonder why he did that?" she said, quickly. "I told him distinctly that I do not intend to marry Captain Osborne. There was no need of his saying anything more about it to any one."

"Your father thinks your decision a very foolish one, Frances."

"I know he does, but I can't help it; and I wish you would not talk to me about it," she exclaimed.

"Your father asked me to do so. He is kind enough to suppose that I have some influence with you; and he thinks that if I assured you Raymond Osborne was a really good, noble-hearted man, well worthy of your love in every way, you might change your mind."

"I shall never change it. Please, Hugh, say nothing more about him to me!"

And there was a sound of a choking sob in the girl's voice as she spoke.

Hugh looked sharply at her.

"Did Captain Osborne come too late, Frances?" he asked. "Was there some one else before him?"

She answered nothing; but for one brief moment their eyes met, and he knew how it was.

He drew a long breath, pushed the dark hair

back from his brow, and then laid his hand on hers. She made a movement as though she would draw it away, but he held it fast.

"Little sister," he said, "you and I have always been very good friends, and I want to tell you about two people I knew once. They liked each other very much, and had circumstances only been different, they might have made each other's happiness. But he was poor, and she was rich. He dared not go to her father and ask for her, for he knew that he would accuse him of having made use of his hospitality, to win her privately, and prevent her from thinking of the man whose wife her father wished her to become. He could not do it, Frances, in all honor he could not. Would you have respected that man if he had?"

"I would," Frances answered, "if he knew that she cared for him."

Silence fell between them. He let her hand go and covered his face with both his. In the issue of that moment was balanced the happiness or misery of her life, for she knew—she had known for a long time—that all the love of her heart was given to Hugh Garnett.

"It was impossible!" he said, hoarsely. "She might acquit him of baseness, but the world never would, nor would his own sense of honor."

"Some people mistake pride for honor," cried Frances, forgetting everything in the bitterness of the thought that they were to be parted by such a trifle.

Hugh smiled, but very faintly and sadly.

"Look at it from another point of view," he said. "Supposing that he yielded to the power of the love which he felt for her; that he went and told her father he had won from her a promise to be his wife, how do you think he would have been received? Would her father have said, 'I know that you love her for herself alone; I give her to you gladly and freely?' Would he not rather have upbraided him with his treachery, and vowed that, with his consent, she should never be his? I want you to answer me, Frances, which course would her father have taken?"

The girl's lips moved, but no sound came from them. She knew what her father's decision would have been, and she knew her doom.

Silently she stood up, and he followed her away from the place where the white heath was fading and dying.

"Oh, if I had only known—if I had only known!" he kept saying to himself, with all the bitterness of self-reproach. "Blind, selfish fool that I was not to think of her sooner! But I never dreamed that she cared about me! I thought that I was to be the only sufferer! Oh, darling, if I could only tell you how I hate myself for what I have done!"

CHAPTER X.

HARD TO BEAR.

A PERIOD of gayety such as had rarely been remembered in the neighborhood followed Ralph's return.

The house was filled with visitors. There were excursions of all kinds, walking parties, driving and riding parties, tennis and archery for those who felt so inclined. An impromptu stage was fitted up and rehearsals for charades and private theatricals gave plenty of employment when the weather did not permit of any out door amusement; there were music and dancing nearly every evening, and invitations were issued for a ball, which promised to be the largest and most brilliant that the village had ever witnessed.

To Lillie all this was quite new, and it had all the charm of novelty; nevertheless, she was not perfectly contented, for she fain would have had her lover more entirely to herself; but it sometimes happened that for days they would be scarcely ten minutes at a time alone together.

"I wish all these people were gone, Frances," she said once to her sister. "What do we want of them here? All Ralph's time is taken up entertaining them; he seems to have none to spare for me. Oh, I hope they will go soon!"

Very cordially did Frances re-echo the wish, though from a different motive. Her heart was far too heavy to enjoy a dance or *fete*, or to find pleasure in the society of their gay friends.

But a sudden and unexpected check came to this rapid whirl of gayety. On the morning after the ball Ralph announced that he was called to New York on important business.

He had put his name to a bill to oblige a friend, and now there would probably be some unpleasantness about it. He must be on the spot in person to arrange matters.

Such was the explanation which he gave to his uncle and Lillie—a false one, of course, for the real reason for his hurried departure was a letter from Miriam, threatening that if he was not with her by a certain day she would come herself and fetch him.

He knew that she was quite capable of putting that threat into execution, and he dared not disobey.

"I would give worlds not to have to go," he said to Lillie, as he was parting from her.

And he spoke truly, for the prospect of a reunion with his beautiful, passionate wife filled him with anything but joy.

He realized fully now how galling were the fetters which she had fastened round him, and how different his life might have been but for her. It was horrible the thought of going back to her; of listening to the reproaches which she would be sure to heap on him on

account of his long desertion; for from the letters which he had received almost daily he knew perfectly well what he had to expect.

Was there no way of freeing himself from this tyrant? Was this marriage of his to hang forever like a millstone round his neck? Acknowledge her as his wife he dared not after the threat uttered by Corran; and he felt convinced that she would not tolerate such concealment much longer.

Thus he mused as the train was bearing him rapidly on toward the city. And then he read Miriam's last letter, the immediate cause of that journey, and other thoughts came crowding into his mind, for a few lines in that letter told him that her mother's health, which had been failing for some time, was becoming daily worse—that she was dying, in fact. While his uncle's life had been in such danger, Ralph had deliberately calculated the advantage which he would derive from his death. There was nothing strange, then, in his wondering what difference that of Mrs. Shaw would make to him; whether Corrin would evince less animosity toward the daughter when the mother was no more, and whether he would urge him all the more strongly to fall in with his plans, having but one enemy instead of two to deal with.

"I must go and see him to-morrow, at all events," he said to himself. "I hope he will let me have some more money. Miriam certainly manages to spend it pretty fast. What a bill that man would have against me were he to look for repayment; but of course he has a right to help me out of the mess he helped me into. He thinks me a fool for not giving in to him altogether, I dare say. I wish I had either courage to do as he wants or to shoot myself—I really do."

Garnett Holm very soon lapsed into its normal condition of quiet dullness, for when Ralph, who was the life and soul of the party, was gone, none of the guests cared to prolong their stay. Frances and Lillie were not very sorry to see them depart, but when November came to an end, and December commenced without any mention being made of Ralph's return, poor Lillie grew very lonely and unhappy.

"What can he want in New York all this time?" she would say, fretfully. "If he really cared for me he would stay here, and not want to be away so much."

But when either Frances or her father ventured to say he was unkind and neglectful, she accused them of wishing to make her miserable, and any conversation on the subject invariably ended in a burst of passionate weeping.

A heavy cloud seemed to hang over the house. Mr. Garnett, though much stronger

and better, had lost much of his good temper. He was vexed with Ralph, and had never been able to forgive Frances for her decided refusal of Captain Osborne.

"I never found the place so stupid as I do this winter," he declared one day; "and Hugh never comes near us now. But I am going to ask him to spend Christmas here. I am sure he will be delighted to come."

The invitation was sent, and an answer came by return of post, but it was a decided refusal. Frances could have told what the reason was, but she held her peace, and Mr. Garnett was wroth with his favorite.

Christmas Day came, cold, bleak and cheerless. A good deal of snow had fallen a few days before, but it had nearly melted now, and a thick sleet was still driving against the windows.

"So he thinks I ought to be content with this!" cried Lillie, as she threw down on the breakfast-table a bracelet of really beautiful workmanship which she had received from Ralph. "If he does not choose to come himself I don't want any presents from him. I have more jewelry than I know what to do with, and I mean to write and tell him so."

"Had you a letter from him?" asked her father.

"Just two or three lines to wish me a merry Christmas, and to say how sorry he is he can't be here to-day. Why can he not, I should like to know? My last letter to him was quite a long one, three sheets full; but I don't suppose he will ever care to have it."

And she stood up and went over to the window, to hide the tears which were falling fast.

Her father looked at her with troubled eyes.

"Matters cannot go on any longer like this," he said. "If Ralph does not come back in a few days I will go myself to New York and find out what is keeping him there."

Frances's face grew pale; but before she had time to speak, Lillie had come up to him and wound her arms around his neck.

"Oh, papa, if you would only do that!" she sobbed. "Will you go to-morrow, and bring him back with you?"

"We will give him to the end of the week," Mr. Garnett answered. "There, don't fret any more, little one; it will be all right yet."

At that very same hour a rather stormy scene was taking place in the little room in the city.

Standing opposite to each other were Ralph and Miriam, her face all aflame with passion, his white and cold.

"I will see the letter," she was saying; "I will see what that girl says to you! I insist on it—it is my right!"

"You shall not!" he answered, decidedly, with a pause between each word.

"But I will!" And before he knew what she was doing, she had snatched the letter from him. But it stayed in her grasp for a moment only; with a muttered oath he seized her wrist, wrenched the closely-written sheets, crushed and torn, from her hand, and held them in the blaze of the fire until nothing remained but a mass of ashes.

"You shall repent of this!" cried Miriam, the passion in her breast increasing almost to fury. "The next letter you get from her will be no love sick epistle, for you shall write to her to-day, and tell her you are married to me!—if you don't, I will! I have borne this far too long as it is. I was a fool ever to marry you under those conditions; my mother told me so at the time, but I would not mind her; and one of the last things she said to me before she died was, that I would be sorry yet that I did not make you end your engagement with Lillie Garnett long ago. You like her a thousand times better than you do me—you know you do, and you can't deny it!"

Ralph stood silent. The quick, uneven heaving of his chest the only sign that he was listening to her.

"Do you hear me?" she asked, raising her voice still louder. "Do you intend to do as I wish? You can easily borrow money enough for the present, and do without Edward Garnett's help. That old man is not going to live forever, I suppose! Will you write this evening, Ralph?"

"I will write this evening," he answered, so quietly that Miriam wondered at him. "And Lillie Garnett's name need never be mentioned between you and me again; from to-day I am done with the old life, and am going to begin a new one. It will be entirely your own making, Miriam—you must remember that. I never would have thought of severing old ties, as I am going to do, if you had but acted differently."

Without giving her time to say anything more, he left the room; and from the window she saw him go down the road with long, swinging strides. An empty hansom was passing; he hailed it, and in less than half an hour he was at James Corran's house.

"Do anything you please; I will agree to anything; only free me from her," were the words with which he greeted the attorney. "I have borne with her as long as I possibly could; but she has made it impossible for me to live with her another day!"

Greatly to Mr. Garnett's relief, there was no necessity for him to put his threat of going to New York to see after Ralph into execution; for on the morning after Christmas Day a letter came from him, saying that he might be expected the following evening. The young man's reception was not nearly so cordial as it

had been on the last occasion of his return from the city, and he seemed to feel the difference; and Lillie, though feeling justly angry with him, could not but pity him as she noted how low his spirits were, and the gloomy, troubled expression of his face.

During dinner very little remark was made about his absence, but as soon as Lillie and Frances had left him and his uncle alone, Mr. Garnett spoke his mind.

"How long do you intend to honor us with your presence this time?" he said, abruptly, his eyes fixed on Ralph's face.

"Are you tired of me already, uncle?" asked Ralph, with a forced laugh.

"This is no jesting matter," the other returned, gravely. "I wish to know what kept you all this time in New York, why you returned at all, and what you intend to do while here?"

Ralph began to study the pattern of his dessert plate intently, and made no reply.

"You must make up your mind one way or other," his uncle continued, sternly. "You have been a free agent all along, and you are a free agent still. If you refuse to give me an explanation of your conduct, I shall consider that you wish to be set free from your engagement to my daughter, and I need hardly tell you that neither Lillie nor I wish to hold you to that engagement for one moment against your will. I will only make one stipulation—that is, you quit Garnett Holm immediately, and do not return to it. Your allowance shall not be stopped; if you have contracted any debts I will help you to pay them, but there can be no further communication between us again."

Ralph listened to him with his head bent, and for some minutes he did not speak. There was a fierce and desperate struggle going on in his breast. Should he accept the freedom offered him so generously and freely? Or should he still continue to follow the crooked path which he had commenced to tread?

Duty and conscience very nearly triumphed over crime and treachery just then—very nearly, but not entirely, for raising his pale, agitated face, he said, in a voice little above a whisper:

"Forgive me, uncle, and let me stay here. Please do not send me away."

Scarcely were the words spoken, when his hand was clasped in his uncle's, and he saw that the tears were glistening in the old man's eyes.

"Forgive you, my boy?—that I will with all my heart!" he said, warmly. "I knew you would never throw us over like that. I think it would have broken my heart if we had to quarrel. But, Ralph," and there was a sad tone in his voice now, "you cannot deny

that you have been treating us far from well lately."

"I know that," Ralph answered slowly. "I sowed some wild oats once, and am reaping them now, and a very bitter harvest it is. I have had troubles and difficulties many, but not all of them my fault, and I will take it as the greatest kindness if you do not question me about them just at present."

"Very well; I will trust you to have done nothing dishonoring to our family name. But tell me this much, Ralph: were any of your troubles caused by want of money?"

"Yes; some of them."

"I thought it might be so when I saw you looking so badly, and I got this ready to give you."

Ralph took the paper which he handed him. It was a check, signed and dated, but the places for writing the amount that it was intended to represent were blank.

"Fill it in for any sum you may require," Mr. Garnett added. "I do not mind how much it is. You were to have had that check in any case, Ralph."

The young man crushed it in his hand, started from his place, and flinging himself on the sofa, lay there sobbing like a child.

CHAPTER XI.

OVERTAKEN.

WINTER was over, and spring had come—bright, fresh, and beautiful; and such a spring of sunshine and gladness Lillie Garnett had never before known in the course of her young life. Not a single wish of her heart was unfulfilled, not a doubt of her lover's truth and loyalty troubled her heart; there was no jarring element, nothing to disturb her peace.

Each day as it came seemed, if possible, brighter than the last, and neither she nor her father had any fault to find with Ralph now. He was graver and more thoughtful than before—he had grown older-looking; and the anxious, harrowed look which every one had noticed on his return from New York in the winter had never entirely left his face. But there were no more sudden journeys and mysterious absences: he appeared to have lost the desire for change and excitement, and the one thought of his heart seemed to be to please Lillie and to make her happy.

He really did love her as much as it was in his nature to love any one; and none the less, perhaps, on account of all that he had gone through—for her sake, he tried to persuade himself.

One grows accustomed to everything in time, and he was gradually becoming used to the burden of his conscience, which at first had seemed as though it would drive him mad.

Sometimes, when with Lillie, he succeeded in forgetting it altogether, though often he would keep morbidly picturing to himself the horror and loathing with which all those round him would shrink from him had they but the faintest suspicion of who he really was, what guilty secrets he held in his heart, and what he had done to conceal them.

Swiftly the time sped on, and people began to talk with more eagerness and interest of the preparations which were being made for the marriage of Edward Garnett's daughter with his heir. The sewing girls of the village were working hard at pieces of elaborate needlework, and were looking forward impatiently to the day when, according to an old-fashioned custom, they were to walk in procession, dressed in white, strewing flowers on the young bride's path.

"Another week, darling, and you will be all my own."

So spoke he whom the world believed to be Ralph Garnett, as he and Lillie sat side by side in a little arbor facing the river.

"Another week!" she repeated, softly, after him. "Ralph, don't be angry with me, but sometimes I almost feel sorry that our wedding is so near."

"Why should you be sorry, Lillie?"

"Because I have been so happy—oh, so very happy for the last four months; ever since that time we nearly quarreled with you for staying so long in New York—don't you remember? I was so wretched and lonely without you, and it seemed like a beautiful dream to have you back again. Ralph, no matter what happens, I am always going to think of these four months as the most perfect of my life, and I am very sorry they have come to an end—I really am."

Something like a shudder went through him, but for answer he drew her closer to him and kissed her.

"I never was so happy before, and I never expect to be so happy again," Lillie went on. "It seems quite impossible to me. Can you say the same, Ralph?"

"I hope we shall be a great deal happier, dear," he answered; and in his heart he added: "What would life be worth if I were always to feel as wretched as I do now?"

He was strangely nervous and ill at ease that April afternoon. Why it should be so he could not understand; but he shuddered again while telling Lillie that her fancies were foolish, and assuring her that their life together would be filled with a happiness of which what she felt now was only a faint foretaste.

Soon the shadows began to lengthen, and they went slowly back toward the house. Neither of them spoke much, for thoughts many and various were in the heart of each.

Frances met them in the hall as they came in.

"Your dress has just come, Lillie," she said. "We are waiting for you to unpack it."

"My wedding dress?" the girl exclaimed. "Where is it, Frances?"

And with crimson cheeks and a beating heart, she went away with her sister.

The sun was sinking down into the valley, and Ralph stood by the window of his room watching it dreamily. The sky had changed to dark gray, and the stars were beginning to show before he stirred or moved. Then, with a start, he went and opened his door, for some one had rapped quickly and sharply on it.

The butler was standing there with a note on a silver tray.

"This was to be given to you immediately, sir," he said.

Ralph's hand trembled as he took it. It trembled so that he had scarcely power to strike a light. He read the note quickly, though a low, inarticulate cry of terror fell from his lips.

"Nothing wrong, sir, I hope?" inquired the butler, who, having known him ever since he was a boy, considered himself privileged to ask such a question.

Ralph looked confusedly round.

"No—nothing," he answered; "and, Thompson, 'tis just dinner time, is it not? Don't let them wait for me. I have to go out, and I may be delayed for some time."

"Very well, sir," answered Thompson, respectfully; but as the young man brushed past him and ran down-stairs, he shook his head mournfully.

"There is something not quite as it ought to be," he said to himself. "I never saw any one look more scared than he did when he read that bit of a note."

Down through the shrubbery hurried Ralph, never pausing until he reached the arbor where he had sat that afternoon with Lillie, and there, looking like an avenging spirit, Miriam was waiting for him.

Those two who had once been lovers, who had vowed marriage vows, stood facing each other, fear and horror in the eyes of one, triumphant malice in those of the other.

"Are you glad to see me, my husband?" she asked, with a low, mocking laugh. "You came quickly enough when I sent for you, at any rate. How eager you must feel to receive my thanks for all your loving care and kindness since we last met? I owe you a deep debt of gratitude, Ralph, and I am going to pay it now. Oh, you have been a model husband! First to neglect me as you did, then to send me word you were ill, and beg me to come to you at once, so as to entice me into the prison you had ready for me. But bolts and bars had

no power over me, and I managed to escape. Will you invite me to be one of the guests at the grand wedding that is to come off next week?—for there will be no wedding at all if your wife is not at it, I can promise you that, Ralph!”

And she laughed again up into his face.

“Keep back, will you!” he exclaimed, as he himself recoiled some steps away from her.

“So that is the only greeting you have for me!” continued Miriam, in the same mocking tones. “A right-loving one, certainly! Are you going to speak to me like that before Edward Garnett, when you introduce me to him as your wife?”

“You may wait a long time for such an introduction,” returned Ralph, roughly. “You are not my wife; you never were. What you thought to be marriage was a mere sham.”

“Was it really? Who told you so?” she asked, nothing taken aback.

“One who understands the law, and who ought to know.”

“Oh, you mean your uncle. He came to me with the same story. That man is a charming person, Ralph. He used to pay me long visits, and talk about my mother, and how glad he was to be able to visit her treatment of him on me, and to promise me a long, happy life, spent every day of it in the miserable little room they had locked me into; and he told me I was not really married to you. But I know better, for I was with a first-class lawyer before I got the license, and there was not a fault or a flaw in it.”

“I don’t believe you,” answered Ralph; but from the look on his face she saw that he did.

“Others will if you won’t,” she answered, quietly. “I have a copy of the certificate, which will be quite proof enough for Mr. Garnett. They took all my papers and money from me in the last home my dear husband gave me; but there was a little box of mine I had given to a friend to take care of, for I had a kind of feeling that there might be foul play some time or other, and that it would be useful to have that certificate, with a few letters of yours and some money, put away safely out of your reach. I knew you were beginning to hate me; but that you would do what you did, and then agree to marry some one else, I never dreamed such a thing possible—never!”

“It was Corran’s fault, and not mine,” Ralph said, sulkily. “He threatened to tell everything, if I owned you as my wife. Between that and your jealousy, and the thought that the marriage was no real one—”

“Stop!” she interrupted. “Did you believe that in your heart? Did you really and honestly believe that you were lawfully entitled to take another wife?”

“I did; of course I did.”

“And are you glad that you have been saved in time from doing it? Are you glad I got free to warn you?”

“Better now than later,” he muttered.

“Miss Lillie probably will think the same. Come up to the house with me now, Ralph.”

“To the house?” he re-echoed, faintly.

“Yes, certainly; and they will be delighted to see us, I am sure. We are going to be a merry family party this evening. Come! you had better do as I wish, or they shall hear a little more about you than that you are married to me.”

“Go, then, and tell them everything you please!” exclaimed Ralph. “Go; make haste!”

“Will you not come with me? Think quietly about it, Ralph,” she said, laying her hand on his arm to detain him, for he was in the act of leaving the arbor. “I sent for you to meet me here, to avoid scandal or talk. You have treated me vilely, and all the reparation I ask is to be acknowledged as your wife. Come now; you will be sorry afterward if you refuse.”

“I do refuse!” he cried. “Do you think I could go to Lillie and tell her about you? Oh, Lillie! Lillie! if I could only save you this, I would not care about myself.”

And leaning against the stem of a tree, convulsive, tearless sobs shook his frame.

She watched him with angry, glittering eyes and she went up close to him.

“You must come,” she said; “now, this very minute. If not, you can go out in the world branded as the felon’s son—the vile, shameless, lying impostor! Come!”

“No!” he thundered; “go yourself and tell her and every one else what you please. Tell her, too, that sooner than see her misery I have sent you to tell the whole story.”

But Miriam was not to be so easily thwarted in her purpose. With a firm grasp her hands closed on his arm, and she put forth all her force to drag him with her.

“You must!” she reiterated. “I will have it so! You must, Ralph!”

In passionate anger he pushed her from him, struggling to break loose from her, while she clung all the closer and tighter.

The dew was falling, the night was dark, and the grassy bank of the river was wet and slippery. There was a sudden splash, a wild cry of agonized fear, and the black waters closed over them both.

Numb with cold, wet, dripping, almost palsied with terror, and faint with her desperate struggle for life, Miriam dragged herself up the bank a few minutes later, and lay there shivering and alone.

In Garnett Holm all slept.

There had been some anxious wondering as to where Ralph could be, but the old butler

delivered the message left with him, while his sense of fidelity to his young master kept him from speaking about the note which he had brought him.

And so they said, "If he does not come back to-night, he will be here to-morrow, and we will know then what kept him away."

And on the morrow they found him, whither the current of the stream had borne him; the bright, early sunshine falling full on him, the clear drops of water glistening like gems in his hair, his pale lips sealed forever in death.

There was wild and bitter mourning for him. From far and near people came flocking to pay the last honors to his memory, and some of the noblest of the land stood by when the felon's son was laid to rest.

But among the mourners Edward Garnett was not to be seen, for the old man lay dying, stricken down by the blow he had received.

At first, when he had been told the news, he had borne it with wonderful fortitude and resignation; but on the evening of that terrible day, a woman, dressed in limp, soiled mourning garments, and closely veiled, had demanded an interview with him.

For nearly two hours she remained with him in his study. When she went away she left the door half-open behind her, and Thompson, thinking that he heard his master call, went in.

Edward Garnett was standing by the fireplace, burning some letters, and a strong iron box, in which he always kept a large sum in gold, lay on the table beside him, open and quite empty. He threw the last of the letters into the fire, and then fell to the ground perfectly unconscious. Before very long he partially revived, but from that moment every one knew that the hand of death was on him.

Once some remark was made in his hearing about his strange visitor, and, with an energy of which no one deemed him capable, he com-

manded that the subject should never again be mentioned either in his presence or elsewhere.

Nevertheless the servants did talk among themselves, and there were those who maintained that the woman who had come to him that evening was Miriam Shaw.

The seasons came and the seasons went, and many years have passed since then. The true story of how the luckless Ralph met his death was never known, for any revelations made by Miriam to Edward Garnett remained a secret which went with him to his early grave.

Truly indeed had the old man loved him in life, so much so that he would not suffer a breath of shame or reproach to touch his name in death.

There have been many changes in Garnett Holm. Children's voices and the patter of little feet may be heard there, and the white heath, which once listened to a tale of such hopeless love, has bloomed and faded many times since Frances and Hugh Garnett knelt together before the altar.

Lillie, changed from a gay, light-hearted child into a grave, thoughtful woman, lives with them; the furnace of affliction through which she has passed has left her far gentler, sweeter, and nobler than before. The promise of her girlish days has been fulfilled, and she is very beautiful, though there is a sadness in her smile, and often a pensive, far-away look in her eyes.

She declares that she intends to be Aunt Lillie always, to pet and spoil Frances's little ones. Every one feels that should she leave them, a great blank would remain unfilled, and yet Hugh and Frances hope that at no very distant period she may go from their home to one of her own, and that all her life is not to be overshadowed by the crushing sorrow that once befell her.

THE END.

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Beadle and Adams, Publishers,
No. 98 William street, New York.